Strategies for a Better Night's Sleep

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [1], February / 2013

Listen to theCancer.Net Podcast: Strategies for a Better Night's Sleep[2], adapted from this feature

People living with cancer sometimes have trouble sleeping, and for some, sleep is a nightly challenge. Disruptions in sleep patterns may be a physical side effect of cancer or cancer treatment or may be caused by stress and anxiety [3]. Talk with your health care team about any sleep problems you experience so they can make any necessary adjustments to your medical treatment. In addition, some simple changes to your daily habits, sleep environment, and stress level can make a big difference in the amount and quality of your sleep and, ultimately, in your quality of life.

Daytime habits

What you do during the day can affect how well you sleep at night. Consider adopting these habits:

- Try to get up at the same time every day, even if you did not sleep well the night before and during the weekend.
- Exercise daily. The type of physical activity should be based on your age, fitness level, stage and type of cancer, and cancer treatment. Learn more about physical activity for people living with cancer [4].
- Limit the amount of caffeine you consume, and avoid drinking caffeine after noon. Caffeinated beverages include coffee, tea, carbonated sodas, and hot chocolate.
- Limit your alcohol consumption, and avoid drinking alcoholic beverages before bedtime. Although alcohol has an initial sedating (calming) effect that may help you fall asleep, it disrupts the sleep cycle throughout the night.
- Stop smoking, or at least cut back, and avoid smoking after 6 PM. Nicotine, an addictive substance found in tobacco, acts as a stimulant and can keep you awake. Learn more about stopping tobacco use after a cancer diagnosis [5].
- Avoid napping during the day. It can potentially disrupt your body?s sleep/wake schedule. If you must take a nap, limit it to 20 to 30 minutes.

Bedtime routine

Preparing your body for sleep with a nightly routine may be helpful. Here are some suggestions:

- Try to go to bed at the same time every night, even if you didn?t sleep well the night before and during the weekend.
- Allow yourself a few minutes in the early evening to write down any responsibilities or concerns that you have on your mind, and set them aside for the night.
- Eat dinner before 8 PM because the digestive process can disrupt sleep. However, since hunger can disrupt sleep as well, eating a light snack before bedtime may help.
- Minimize your exposure to light and noise before you go to bed because they can stimulate arousal (the state of being awake). This includes watching television or using the computer.
- Do something you enjoy and find relaxing before you go to bed, such as taking a bath, reading, or doing relaxation exercises.
- Get in bed only when you are ready for sleep.
- If you don?t fall asleep within 15 to 20 minutes, leave the bedroom and do something relaxing until you feel tired.

Sleep environment

Some people find that making simple changes to their sleeping area helps.

- Adjust your bedding, pillows, and mattress firmness to make them comfortable for you.
- Only use the bed for sleep and sex. Do not work or engage in other activities in the bedroom that may keep you awake. To that end, keep televisions and computers out of your bedroom.
- Keep your bedroom well ventilated and at a comfortable temperature.
- Block disruptive noise using a fan or a machine that creates soothing background noise, if necessary.
- Eliminate as much light as possible. It may be helpful to purchase blinds, window shades, and/or blackout curtains.

Stress reduction

These tips can help lower your stress level for a good night?s sleep:

- Do gentle stretching exercises daily to relieve muscle tension.

- Practice relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and meditation.
- Keep a journal of your experiences and thoughts. Learn more about finding comfort through journaling [6].
- Listen to soothing music.
- Express your emotions through art, such as painting, drawing, or sculpture.

Learn more about managing stress [7].

Using a sleep journal

Keeping track of your sleep-related behaviors can help you identify patterns in your sleeping habits and learn which behaviors help and disrupt these sleep patterns. To start keeping a sleep journal, create a chart with a column for each day on the left-hand side and a row across the top for factors such as the time you went to bed, how many times you woke up during the night, what disturbed your sleep (if you know what affected it), what time you woke up in the morning, how much caffeine or alcohol you consumed, and whether you exercised. If you would prefer to use a pre-made chart, search the Internet using terms such as ?sleep diary,? ?sleep journal,? or ?sleep log.?

More Information

Sleeping Problems: Insomnia [8]

Sleeping Problems: Hypersomnia, Somnolence Syndrome, and Nightmares [9]

Fatigue [10]

Coping With Uncertainty [11]

Additional Resource

National Cancer Institute: Sleep Disorders [12].

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[2] http://www.cancer.net/sites/cancer.net/files/Strategies_for_a_Better_Nights_Sleep.mp3
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25479
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/24996
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/28476
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24528
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/24589
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/25058
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/25057
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/25048
[11] http://www.cancer.net/node/24493
[12] http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/sleepdisorders/patient