

Sleep and pain

The sleep-pain trap

Do you have trouble getting to sleep, staying asleep, or both?

Poor sleep and pain often go hand-in-hand, creating a cycle that is hard to break.

Many people in pain report that they either don't get enough sleep, or that they wake up feeling unrefreshed.

A lack of sleep leaves you fatigued, run down and irritable, and your ability to cope with pain reduces. Poor sleep can cause pain flare-ups.

While pain itself can affect sleep, a lot of other factors can contribute to the sleep problem including:

- Worries, stress, anxiety and depression
- Medications
- Daytime naps and resting
- Coffee, tea, energy drinks and alcohol
- Big evening meals
- Stimulating activities just before bed (eg. TV and computing)
- Irregular bed routines

How to improve your sleep

1. Record your sleep patterns

Use a sleep diary to figure out how much sleep you're getting and how refreshing it is. As part of this diary, record habits and trends that could be affecting your sleep.

2. Be a detective

Look for links between your recorded patterns of sleep and daily habits and trends.

It can be useful to work with your health professional, as the links are not always obvious at first.

3. Make a change

Pick out 1-2 habits or trends that are affecting your sleep. Decide what you are going to do differently for the next week. Start with the easier changes and come back to the hard ones later.

See 'Sleep Strategies' for ideas.

Again, it can be helpful to work with your health professional on this step.

4. Record what you do

Write down your planned changes. Continue your sleep diary and record whether you are following your plan.

5. Review and revise

Each week look for changes in sleep quantity and quality. It generally takes time and persistence for sleep to change, so be prepared to stick to your plan for several weeks before seeing any progress.

Over time, gradually introduce more changes to improve your sleep.

Sleep strategies

During the day:

- Avoid daytime naps. If you need to nap, keep it to 20 minutes and before 3pm.
- Become more physically active
- Become more mentally active
- Spend some time outdoors

During the evening:

- Avoid alcohol and big meals
- Avoid stimulating drinks such as tea, coffee and energy drinks
- Have a regular bedtime and get up time. Routine prepares your mind and body for sleep
- Relax before going to bed
- Avoid stimulating activities just before bedtime (eg. TV, exercise)

Around bedtime:

- Make sure your bedroom is comfortable, quiet and dark
- Keep your bedroom slightly cool, but not cold
- Turn the clock face away from you to avoid clock watching
- Don't eat, work, read or watch TV in bed. Help your body learn to associate your bedroom with sleep.

If you can't sleep during the night:

- Use relaxation techniques
- Acknowledge your pain, but don't react to it
- Deal with distressing thoughts
- Keep a pen and paper by your bed to write down your worries
- After 20 minutes get up and do something relaxing (don't watch TV). When you feel sleepy go back to bed. Repeat until you fall asleep. Remember that you still get rest while you are relaxing.

Medicines

- Discuss your medicines with your doctor or pharmacist

Anxiety and/or depression

- Consider if you need to take steps to address your anxiety and/or depression

Sources:

- Finan, P.H. et. Al (2013) The association of sleep and pain: An update and a path forward. American Pain Society. 14 (12): pp1539-1552.
- Nicholas et al (2011). Manage Your Pain (3rd Ed.) Harper Collins: Australia.
- <http://www.nps.org>