

Understanding and Managing Sleep Problems in Palliative Care



Sleep is a common problem for a lot of people. When we sleep well we feel good, as sleep is a powerful and natural form of self care. We have put this leaflet together to give you a better understanding of sleep and some techniques you can try.

Common sleep problems:

We all have different sleep needs - some more, some less. Some common sleep problems can include:

Insomnia: This can be difficulty getting to sleep. It can also be struggling to stay asleep, or not feeling like you have had restful sleep. This can make you feel like you are tired throughout the day.

Disorders of the sleep-wake cycle: This can happen when a person's sleep is disrupted. This can be by noises, disturbances, as a result of physical symptoms or worries/thoughts. Disrupted sleep can make a person feel more tired during the day. Reduced activity during the day can impact on our quality of sleep, whereas increased activity can help our sleep.

Excessive daytime sleepiness: When people haven't slept at night time they may become more tired and drowsy during the daytime. This is different to the fatigue and tiredness which is common in people with terminal illness.

What causes sleep problems?

There can be many reasons why a person has sleep problems and changes in sleep patterns, some of these could include;

- Increase in discomfort levels
- Nausea or vomiting
- Some medication side effects
- Breathing problems, for example, breathlessness or coughing
- Anxiety, worries or difficult thoughts
- Bladder and bowel symptoms - such as getting up to use the toilet a lot during the night
- Reduced activity during the daytime
- Uncontrolled symptoms
- Environmental changes - cold room, noisy environment, light levels
- Caffeine, nicotine or alcohol levels



Sleep hygiene suggestions:

Sleep hygiene is a common term used to describe habits and routines conducive to sleeping better.

Making small, practical changes can help us to sleep better, in turn having a positive effect on our emotional, physical and general wellbeing.

Maintain a regular sleep routine - try to go to bed and get up the same time everyday

The right space - Ensure your bed and bedroom are quiet, dark and comfortable for sleeping. Keep the connection that the bedroom is for sleeping and intimacy. By using your TV, phone or laptop which emits blue light, your body will lose the association that the bedroom is the place for sleep and rest.

The right temperature - Try to keep the bedroom a comfortable temperature. If the room feels too cold consider some extra blankets on the bed. If it is too warm consider use of a fan.

'Clock watcher'- Hide the clock in your bedroom. Your adrenaline will only increase the amount of times you look at the clock and think 'I should be asleep by now' or 'if I get to sleep now I will only have X amount of hours sleep'. This adrenaline only feeds into us staying awake.

Sleep when sleepy - Go to bed when you actually feel tired or sleepy, rather than spending too much time in bed awake.

Get up and try again - If you haven't been able to get to sleep after 20 mins or more, get out of bed and do something calming or boring until you feel sleepy and try again. Avoid doing anything too stimulating like watching TV as this will wake you up further.

Avoid alcohol - Try to avoid alcohol close to bedtime (4-6 hours before bed) as it interrupts the quality of sleep

Avoid caffeine or nicotine - Try avoiding caffeine (tea, coffee, chocolate, cola, and some medications) or nicotine (cigarettes) at least 4-6 hours before bedtime. These substances act as a stimulant and interfere with getting to sleep.

Naps - Try where possible not to nap during the day time, so that you are tired enough for bedtime. Or if you need to, keep this less than 20 minutes and before 3pm.

Exercise - Regular exercise is a good idea and good for our sleep. Exercise doesn't have to be strenuous, even things like pottering around the house or getting up and walking more regularly is all exercise.

Exposure to natural light - Try and get as much natural light as possible during the daytime as this can help sleep. The sunlight warms your body temperature. It helps with the stress hormone cortisol and increases the hormone melatonin, which is the sleepy hormone released as it gets dark.

Bath time - Some people find a relaxing bath or shower 1-2 hours before bedtime can help relax you but also raises your body temperature. As your body temperature drops again, this causes you to become sleepy.

Eat right - A healthy, balanced diet will help with sleep, but timing is just as important. Some people find an empty stomach at bedtime can be distracting when trying to sleep. Light snacks often can help, rather than a big heavy meal before bedtime.

Some gentle, relaxing activities such as relaxation or mindfulness can also encourage a good night's sleep.

Well-being therapies such as aromatherapy such as lavender or chamomile, massage or hypnotherapy can also be useful.

Some useful links:

St Gemma's Hospice - Mindfulness Meditations
<https://www.st-gemma.co.uk/patient-hub/mindfulness>

YouTube - Mindfulness + Relaxation Videos

Apps - Mindfulness.com, Headspace, Relaxation Music

The Sleep Charity - Confidential Helpline
(available Sunday - Thursday between 7pm - 9pm)
03303 530 541



**If you would like any further information
about sleep strategies contact our
Occupational Therapists or Complementary
Therapists, St Gemma's Hospice -
0113 218 5294**

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