

17. Sleep Problems and/or Nightmares

About one in three people with cancer report sleeping difficulties (insomnia) at some point during their treatment. Perhaps this is not surprising in view of the fear and uncertainty that cancer creates. Most insomnia problems are to do with getting off to sleep or waking in the night, followed by difficulty falling to sleep again. Here are some common causes and what may be done about them:

How can I manage my sleep problem?

Worrying about not getting enough sleep - People often worry that not getting enough sleep will damage them in some way. The reality is that not having as much sleep as you would like is not medically harmful to you. So, rather than trying so hard to get to sleep and becoming frustrated if you are unable to do so, why not use the time with the simpler aim of resting. Rest is very good for you and is best achieved by completely relaxing all the muscles in your body.

Treatment – Some medications, such as steroids, can cause people to feel restless. On the other hand, many cancer treatments cause fatigue (physical exhaustion) and, not surprisingly, people often respond to their tiredness by having a nap during the day. However, this can lead to a disruption of the normal sleep-wake cycle. Try to cut down, or even eliminate, any naps during the day and stick to a regular routine of only sleeping at night. To begin with you might need to go to bed slightly earlier than normal but it's better to move to normal sleeping hours as soon as possible.

The sleeping environment - Ensure that your bedclothes are comfortable and suitable for the temperature of the room. Ensure that there is fresh air coming into the room to prevent it from becoming too stuffy or too hot. It is probably better that the room is a little too cool than too warm. Ensure that the bedroom is dark and quiet. Block out any irritating noises or wear earplugs. Try to avoid doing anything in bed other than sleep. Over time you need to strengthen the link your brain makes between lying in bed and sleeping. So avoid eating, watching TV or listening to the radio for long periods of time while you are in your bedroom.

If you simply can't sleep - Only if you have been awake for over half an hour should you think about getting up and walking into another room. If possible sit in a chair and relax or possibly read. Keep the lights low to encourage you to feel sleepy again. Avoid any stimulation such as TV or radio. When you feel sleepy again quietly return to bed and notice the weight of your body sinking into the bed, remembering to focus on resting and allowing sleep to come of its own accord.

Exercise - If you are capable of it, even mild exercise during the day can often help alleviate sleep problems. Of course you should only take exercise when you are ready for it so, if you are unsure, it is important to take advice about when this is.

Diet - Try to avoid drinking any stimulants such as tea, coffee, cocoa, colas or chocolate any later than 4 to 6 hours before bed. Too much alcohol can also cause insomnia. Avoid very spicy or sugary food before bed, and try not to go to bed either very full or hungry since both can disturb sleep, though a small bedtime snack or milky drink can sometimes help one feel sleepier. And remember that smoking is a stimulant and should be avoided around bedtime.

Nightmares - Nightmares are often related to illness and/or medication and often happen at times of stress. It is important to recognise that the nightmare cannot cause any direct harm, though it may result in disturbed sleep. One suggestion to try if you have a nightmare is to "neutralise" the nightmare before going back to sleep. Lie back and visualise a positive, peaceful and happy alternative to the nightmare. Even if you can't think of a specific alternative to the dream, be sure to conjure up pleasant scenes and emotions.

Pain - Pain can cause people to stay awake. Most pain can be successfully treated. (*See Pain in this directory*).

Worry and anxiety - Cancer creates fear and uncertainty, and exposes people to many new experiences.

(See *Worry, Fear and Anxiety in this directory*). At night, with nothing else to distract us, we can feel alone with our thoughts and our minds can turn worries into catastrophes. So instead of doing your worrying at night, plan for a specific time in the day (perhaps the early evening) when you will go through each of your worries, preferably with someone who will listen and help you make sense of them. It can help to write your worries down because this gets them out of you and often makes them feel more controllable. Rather than going to sleep worrying about things over which you may have little control, why not try reading a book – something fun and imaginative – and fall asleep thinking about that. If you wake during the night try to remember the story - what was happening when you put down the book to turn off the light? A warm bath just before bedtime can also help people physically relax or you could think about practising relaxation exercises. Some people also find that sprinkling a few drops of lavender oil on their pillow helps them relax and sleep better.

Sadness and depression - The many months of stress following a diagnosis and during treatment can lead people to feel emotionally exhausted and depressed. People who have become depressed often suffer with difficulty sleeping (See *Sadness and Depression in this directory*).

Local Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
<p>Counselling Service – Mustard Tree Confidential service in the Mustard Tree and the Triangle Centres is available to patients, their carers and their family.</p>	<p>Mustard Tree Macmillan Centre Level 3 Derriford Hospital, Tel: 01752 430060 Each appointment lasts approximately 1 hour and you will be offered an initial 6 complementary sessions</p>
<p>Livewell South West: Panic This workshop aims to break down some of the myths surrounding panic and help you to manage your panic attacks.</p> <p>Mindfulness Mindfulness practice can help you develop the ability to deal with life's pressures. Mindfulness meditation is a skill you can develop and a form of self-awareness training that helps you get to know yourself more fully, think more clearly and in the present moment.</p> <p>Managing Anxiety This one hour workshop provides information on the psychological and physical symptoms of anxiety and strategies to manage this including breathing, goal setting and cognitive behaviour therapy</p> <p>Managing Low Mood This one hour workshop provides information on the psychological symptoms of low mood as well as providing strategies to manage this</p> <p>Managing Stress This one hour workshop introduces the symptoms of stress and how the body responds, and provides simple strategies to manage this</p> <p>Sleep Feel, Feel Well Introduces ways to support restful sleep</p>	<p>Livewell South West: To book a place on any of the 1 hour workshops please call: Tel: 01752 435419 or Email: plymouthoptions@nhs.net</p>
<p>Mustard Tree Cancer Support & Triangle Drop In Centres Ask questions, share concerns, offers a range of services including benefits advice. Support, advice and information for cancer patients and their carers</p>	<p>Mustard Tree, Derriford Hospital: Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm 01752 430060/01752 431468 Kingsbridge: Tuesdays 10am to 4pm 01548 852349 Liskeard: Thursdays 10am to 4pm 01579 373500 Tavistock: Fridays 10am to 4pm 01822 615935</p>
<p>Other Resources</p>	<p>Your GP, Oncology Doctor, Specialist Nurse or District Nurse.</p>

National Resources:

Macmillan Cancer Support Provide comprehensive advice and information on all aspects of cancer.	www.macmillan.org.uk 0808 808 0000 (Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm)
---	---

Further Information:

Macmillan Cancer Support booklets: – available free from the Mustard Tree Macmillan Centre	Booklets and CDs from the BHOC Information and Support Centre
Cancer and complementary therapies	Overcoming fatigue in the context of cancer (self-help booklet guide)
Controlling the symptoms of cancer	Relaxation CD and booklet
Coping with fatigue	
Talking about your cancer	
How are you feeling?	