

Tips to Improve Sleep

Do you have difficulty sleeping? Do you wake up feeling exhausted? You are not alone! Most people with chronic pain have difficulty sleeping. It may be that pain wakes you up, or perhaps you feel exhausted but you just can't get to sleep. Life with chronic pain is hard, but not getting enough sleep makes everything a lot harder.



Scientists are discovering just how important sleep is. We now know that lots of things happen during our sleep. For example, our muscles repair themselves, our memories are logged and stored, hunger hormones that regulate our appetite are produced and the parts of our brain that help us manage stress are more active.

Doing everything we can to get a good night's sleep is important for everyone, but especially when you have chronic pain.

Here are some tips to consider:

Tip 1: Keep in sync with your body's natural sleep-wake cycle



We have a body clock in our brains that helps us to know when it's time to be awake and when we should be sleeping. This is called our circadian rhythm. Everyone is different, some people are naturally night owls and can cope with being up late at night, and others are larks and like to get up early in the morning. You may have found that since having chronic pain, your body clock has changed. Perhaps you just feel sleepy all the time!

Being in pain is exhausting! Lots of people with chronic pain find that they struggle with fatigue, but even if you always feel sleepy, sleeping more isn't always the answer to feeling more refreshed. It is important to get a good routine of sleep.

Try to go to sleep and get up at the same time every day. This helps set your body's internal clock which helps your body to sleep at the right time. Choose a bed time when you normally feel tired, so that you don't toss and turn. Set an alarm to get up in the morning at the same time every day if possible. It may feel nice to sleep in some days, but ideally it's best to get up at the same time. If you have had a really bad night, you could have a daytime nap instead of sleeping in later.



Be smart about napping. While napping is a good way to make up for lost sleep, if you have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep at night, napping can make things worse. Limit naps to 15 to 20 minutes in the early afternoon.

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Fight after-dinner drowsiness. If you get sleepy way before your bedtime, get off the couch and do something mildly stimulating, such as washing the dishes, calling a friend, or getting clothes ready for the next day. If you give in to the drowsiness, you may wake up later in the night and have trouble getting back to sleep.

Tip 2: Control your exposure to light

Our sleep-wake cycle is also affected by a hormone called Melatonin that our brain produces. The brain produces more melatonin when it's dark—making us sleepy—and less when it's light—making us more alert. The problem is that sometimes what we do can prevent our brains producing the Melatonin that we need at the right time. We need the right amount of light in the daytime, and less light in the evening and night. There are some simple things we can do to help with this.



Get as much daylight as possible during the day:

Expose yourself to bright sunlight in the morning. The closer to the time you get up, the better. Have your coffee outside, for example, or eat breakfast by a sunny window. The light on your face will help you wake up

Spend more time outside during daylight. Take your work breaks outside in sunlight, sit in the garden with a cup of tea, exercise outside, or walk your dog during the day instead of at night.



Let as much natural light into your home or workspace as possible. Keep curtains and blinds open during the day, and try to move your desk closer to the window.

If necessary, use a light therapy box. This simulates sunshine and can be especially useful during short winter days.

Reduce light exposure at night:

Avoid bright screens within 1-2 hours of your bedtime.

The blue light emitted by your phone, tablet, computer, or TV is especially disruptive. You can minimize the impact by using devices with smaller screens, turning the brightness down, or changing the settings that many gadgets now have to reduce the blue light.



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When it's time to sleep, make sure the room is dark. Use heavy curtains or shades to block light from windows, or try a sleep mask. Also consider covering up electronics that emit light.

Keep the lights down if you get up during the night. If you need some light to move around safely, try installing a dim nightlight in the hall or bathroom or using a small flashlight. This will make it easier for you to fall back to sleep.

Tip 3: Exercise during the day



Exercise has been proven to help people sleep, but you may struggle to do any form of exercise. Even though you can't do anything too strenuous, just going for a walk is a good way of getting daylight and getting in some exercise. Try and do something regularly if you can.

Relaxing, low-impact exercises such as yoga or gentle stretching in the evening can help promote sleep.

Tip 4: Be smart about what you eat and drink

Your daytime eating habits play a role in how well you sleep, especially in the hours before bedtime.

Limit caffeine and nicotine. You might be surprised to know that caffeine can cause sleep problems up to ten to twelve hours after drinking it! Similarly, smoking is another stimulant that can disrupt your sleep, especially if you smoke close to bedtime.



Avoid big meals at night. Try to make dinner time earlier in the evening, and avoid heavy, rich foods within two hours of bed. Spicy or acidic foods can cause stomach trouble and heartburn.



Avoid alcohol before bed. While a nightcap may help you relax, it interferes with your sleep cycle once you're asleep.

Avoid drinking too many liquids in the evening. Drinking lots of fluids may result in frequent bathroom trips throughout the night.

Tip 5: Wind down and clear your head

Have you ever gone to bed really tired and then your brain just won't switch off? It's very frustrating! Unfortunately there isn't a switch to turn off our brains at night! Sometimes it's just thoughts about the day that may be going through our mind, or it could be things we are worried about.



Think about something else. One way to help get rid of the thoughts that are keeping us awake is to replace them with something less stressful. We can't actually think of more than one thing at a time so if we choose to think about something different, we can't also think about those worrying thoughts. Here are some examples:

- go through the alphabet – boys/girls names beginning with A, B,... etc, (or plants / towns – whatever you like!)
- count backwards from 100 in threes
- think about a wonderful holiday you've had or plan a holiday where money is not limited.

Put worries to one side. Writing down worries and concerns can also be helpful as it makes us think about what it is that is on our mind and what action we can take, if any.



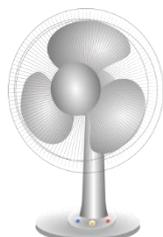
Once they are written down, put to one side and decide to think about it in the morning.

Have a wind-down period. After a busy day of being focussed on lots of things, it's difficult to slow down enough to sleep. Have a wind-down period before bed that calms you down ready for sleep. You may want a bath, or to read a book. A peaceful bedtime routine sends a powerful signal to your brain that it's time to wind down and let go of the day's stresses.

Tip 6: Improve your sleep environment

Sometimes even small changes to your environment can make a big difference to your quality of sleep.

Keep noise down. If you can't avoid or eliminate noise from neighbors, traffic, or other people in your household, try masking it with a fan or sound machine. Earplugs may also help.



Keep your room cool. Most people sleep best in a slightly cool room (around 65° F or 18° C) with adequate ventilation. A bedroom that is too hot or too cold can interfere with quality sleep.

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Make sure your bed is comfortable. Your bed covers should leave you enough room to stretch and turn comfortably without becoming tangled. If you often wake up with a sore back or an aching neck, you may need to experiment with different levels of mattress firmness, foam toppers, and pillows that provide more or less support.

Reserve your bed for sleeping and sex. By not working, watching TV, or using your phone, tablet, or computer in bed, your brain will associate the bedroom with just sleep and sex, which makes it easier to wind down at night.

Tip 7: Learn ways to get back to sleep

It's normal to wake briefly during the night but if you're having trouble falling back asleep, these tips may help:



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Don't stay in bed if you are awake for more than 20 minutes. Tossing and turning in bed just makes us get more frustrated and keeps us awake. Also, if we spend a lot of time in bed awake, our brains begin to associate the bed with being awake, not being asleep, which just makes it even harder to sleep! Get out of bed and do a quiet, non-stimulating activity, such as reading a book. Keep the lights dim and avoid screens so as not to make your body think that it's time to wake up.

Make relaxation your goal, not sleep. Unfortunately, telling yourself to go to sleep doesn't work! So rather than focusing on trying to sleep, try a relaxation technique such as visualization, progressive muscle relaxation, or meditation, which can be done without even getting out of bed. Even though it's not a replacement for sleep, relaxation can still help rejuvenate your body.

Postpone worrying and brainstorming. If you wake during the night feeling anxious about something, make a brief note of it on paper and tell yourself you can worry about it in the morning, then try the distraction techniques mentioned earlier. Similarly, if a great idea is keeping you awake, make a note of it on paper and fall back to sleep knowing you'll be much more productive after a good night's rest.



Don't panic! The worst thing about being awake in the night is worrying about not being able to get to sleep! Use the techniques above and try and tell yourself that you will cope without a full night's sleep – you've done it before!

Tip 7: Get professional advice

Some people have other sleep disorders like sleep apnoea that can be treated, so it is always a good idea to talk to your doctor if nothing seems to help. Some medication can help in the short term, but these aren't generally recommended as a long-term solution. Sometimes other medication that we take can make you awake – even medications that should make people drowsy! It's always a good idea to check with your doctor whether any of your medications could be stopping you sleeping.

Resources for more help

Apps (recommended by the NHS)

<https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/pzizz/>

The Pzizz app helps you quickly calm your mind, fall asleep fast, stay asleep, and wake up refreshed. It uses "dreamscapes" – a mix of music, voiceovers and sound effects designed using the latest clinical research – to help you sleep better at night or take power naps during the day.

<https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/sleepstation/> (Free with GP referral)

Sleepstation is a 6-week online course for people who struggle to fall asleep or stay asleep through the night. The course is tailored to your needs, using the information you provide, and gives you access to a team of sleep experts who will offer helpful advice and support throughout.

More information: www.sleepstation.org.uk/articles/

www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/how-to-get-to-sleep/

My Sleep Plan

Over to You

Think about what makes sleep difficult for you. Identify something that you could try. You will need to try it out for at least a week to see if it will make any difference.

Bed time:

Time to get up:

What stops me sleeping?	What could I try?	Does it work?
<i>Example:</i> <i>Worrying about tomorrow</i>	<i>Write down what is worrying me.</i> <i>Try distraction techniques.</i>	