



SLEEPLESS NIGHTS: BREAST CANCER AND SLEEP

FACT SHEET

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This fact sheet was produced by Breast Cancer Network Australia

I would wake up anything up to 10 times per night. Even though I could have been there for eight or nine hours, not struggling to sleep and only awake for minutes, I often just didn't feel like I had slept well. – Christine

Having trouble sleeping is a very common experience. Many people have trouble sleeping at different times in their lives. For people affected by breast cancer, the stress and worry of dealing with a diagnosis, as well as some breast cancer treatments, can make it difficult to get a good night's sleep.

If you are having problems sleeping, you might be experiencing one of the following issues:

- difficulty falling asleep
- difficulty staying asleep
- waking up earlier than you need or want to
- feeling tired when waking in the morning
- feeling tired throughout the day.

This fact sheet provides information about sleep, tips and strategies that may be helpful if you are having trouble sleeping, and resources and supports that are available.

I remember the nights not being able to sleep. It's like your brain turns on and you start to think too much. – Lyn

What is sleep?

Sleep is made up of a number of stages, which are very different from one another in terms of what's happening beneath the surface. From deep sleep to dreaming sleep, all are essential for your body and mind.

Each stage of sleep plays a different part in preparing you for the day ahead. Stages one and two are light sleep and stages three and four are deep sleep.



Our bodies move between the different stages each night, and to achieve a good night's sleep you need to go through four to five cycles.

Stage one lasts between five and 10 minutes and starts as we begin to fall asleep. It is a light sleep and you can be easily awakened.

Stage two lasts for about 20 minutes, during which our body temperature decreases and our heart rate slows.

During **stage three**, the brain starts to produce deep, slow brain waves and we become less responsive to our environment.

Stage four is when we dream and have rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. Even though our brains are working fast and our eyes are moving rapidly, our muscles are totally relaxed.

4.00 am was my wake time during chemo. No matter how exhausted I was, come 4.00 am, that was it! – Karen

Strategies for better sleep

Research has shown that the following tips and strategies are helpful if you are having trouble sleeping.

Reduce caffeine

Drink plenty of fluids, but no more than two caffeinated drinks per day, preferably before lunch. This includes caffeinated soft drinks, tea, coffee and chocolate. Energy drinks should be avoided. Try caffeine-free herbal teas such as chamomile or lavender.

Have a routine

Have a routine before you go to bed, maybe listening to some music, having a shower and applying moisturiser or something soothing. Aim to go to bed at the same time every night and get up at the same time every day. Avoid 'sleeping in' as this might affect your routine.

Make sure your bedroom is comfortable

Being uncomfortable in bed may affect your ability to sleep. Make sure your bed is comfortable, that your mattress and pillow support your neck and spine and that your bedroom is quiet and dark.

A bedroom temperature of 16°C to 20°C helps lower your core temperature, which will help make you feel drowsy.

Deal with barriers to sleep

If you have pain, don't try to be brave – take some pain killers before going to bed so that pain doesn't wake you. If you have hot flushes, BCNA's booklet *Menopause and breast cancer* has tips to help you. Sometimes medication is very helpful for hot flushes.

Sleep associations

Beds are for sleep and sex. Avoid non-sleep activities in the bedroom, like TV, radio or reading, so your body learns that bed means sleep.

Exercise

Try to exercise regularly. Exercise can help you manage side effects of treatment and improve your mood, which can help you sleep better. Exercise also burns up energy and makes you tired. Try to avoid exercising in the early evening as it can have an 'energising' effect, which is not good for sleep.

Practice good sleep habits

If you are in bed and can't sleep, don't stay there for more than 20 minutes. Instead, get up and do something relaxing in another room such as reading a magazine or book. Getting frustrated at not being able to sleep is likely to lead to your mind becoming more active and then sleep will become harder still.

Try not to fight being awake. Say to yourself, 'Ah, awake again. Well there you go ...' rather than, 'I have to get back to sleep or I won't be able to cope.'

Avoid using electronic devices in bed or in the half-hour leading up to bed, as the light from the devices may delay the release of melatonin (a hormone linked with sleep) and make it more difficult to sleep.

Avoid daytime napping

If possible, don't nap during the day. If you are undergoing treatment or are unwell and need to nap during the day, try to do so before 3.00 pm and for no more than 30 minutes at a time. If you do nap during the day, you may need less sleep at night.

Keep a sleep diary

A sleep diary is a daily record that helps you keep track of what time you go to bed and wake up, how long it takes you to fall asleep, how often you wake up during the night, and how rested you feel in the morning.

You may also wish to record what you eat and drink, the times at which you eat, activities that you think might be affecting your sleep, how tired you feel during the day and anything unusual that has happened during the day that might have impacted your sleep. It may also be helpful to record how you feel when you wake up, such as too hot, too cold or uncomfortable from sleeping in a certain position.

Keep a sleep diary every day, for one or two weeks. Do this each day in the morning when you wake up and at night when you go to bed.

Keeping a sleep diary can help you understand more about your sleep patterns. It may also give you useful clues about what might be impacting your sleep and strategies you could try that could help improve your sleep. If you seek help from a doctor or psychologist, take your sleep diary as this will help them understand your sleep difficulties.

Practice relaxation techniques

Relaxation exercises such as yoga, mindfulness, meditation and tai chi may lessen worry and stress. Slow, deep breathing can also help with relaxation.

If you are interested in learning more about relaxation and meditation techniques, your local council or community health centre may have information about group meditation or relaxation classes. The hospital you are being treated at or your GP may also have information about helpful programs or services in your local area. Some gyms or yoga studios run meditation, yoga or relaxation classes as well. Cancer Councils in each state and territory also often run relaxation courses. For more information, call Cancer Council on 13 11 20.

You may also like to try one of the many relaxation CDs, podcasts or smartphone apps that are available. Cancer Council has produced two CDs – *Relaxation for people with cancer, their families and carers* and *Mindful meditation for people with cancer* – which you can order online or by calling Cancer Council on 13 11 20. You can also find free mindfulness podcasts on iTunes (e.g. Zencast) or YouTube. Rain Sounds HQ is a collection of live-recorded rain sounds that are free to download and may help with relaxation.

If you are finding it hard to stop worrying, a useful technique is to set aside a period of ‘worry time’ during the day. Allow yourself around 15 minutes each day to think about and/or write down everything that is worrying you. Once the 15 minutes is finished, put those thoughts aside. This prevents you from going to bed worrying or lying awake worrying during the night.

It may also help to keep a pen and pad of paper by your bed. If you wake up during the night with a thought that you don’t want to forget, you can make a note of it, but then return to sleep without dwelling on it or worrying that you will forget it.

Maintain a healthy diet

The best night-time meals are those that contain carbohydrates, protein and some calcium. Dairy products are considered to be one of the best foods to induce sleep, which is why you will often hear people recommend a glass of warm milk at bedtime. Try not to go to bed hungry or too full.

What about medication?

Using medication to help with sleep is not recommended unless you have worked through all of these suggestions and are finding that lack of sleep is persisting and adversely affecting your ability to function. Typically, medications for sleep are often helpful for a few days, but then you find you need more to have the same benefit. It can be very difficult to come off these medications.

When to seek professional help

If these tips don’t help you, it may be helpful to seek professional advice from your GP, or a sleep specialist, sleep centre, counsellor or psychologist. If you seek help from a doctor, psychologist or other professional, take your sleep diary with you as it will help them understand your sleep difficulties.

Depression is also a common cause of sleep problems. If you feel low in mood most days, you may be depressed. Professional help through your GP or local hospital can provide effective treatments for depression. You may also like to read BCNA and beyondblue’s fact sheet [Anxiety, depression and breast cancer](#).

Other sources of support

BCNA Member Groups

BCNA Member Groups provide mostly face-to-face support for women and families in communities around Australia. To find a Member Group near you, visit [BCNA](#).

BCNA’s online network

BCNA’s online network provides a way for women to connect in real time, share experiences and stories, and support each other, regardless of location. Sleep difficulties are often discussed by women on the online network. If you are having trouble sleeping, you can post a question and ask for advice from others, as well as share strategies and receive support. Visit [BCNA’s online network](#).

Cancer Council information and support line

Cancer Council’s information and support line (13 11 20) is a free, confidential telephone information and support service run by Cancer Councils in each state and territory. Specialist trained staff members are able to answer questions about cancer, as well as offer emotional support.



They may also be able to suggest a counsellor or psychologist available in your area. Visit [Cancer Council](#).

Jean Hailes for Women's Health

Jean Hailes for Women's Health is a non-profit organisation dedicated to providing women with information about their health and improving the physical and emotional wellbeing of women across Australia. Information about sleep and fatigue is provided on the website. Visit [Jean Hailes for Women's Health](#).

National Cancer Institute (USA)

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) is the American government's key agency for cancer research and training. The NCI has developed a guide about sleep difficulties for people affected by cancer. To view the guide, visit [NCI](#).

Macmillan Cancer Support (UK)

Macmillan Cancer Support is a non-profit organisation in the UK dedicated to providing support to people affected by cancer. A resource for people having trouble sleeping is available on the website. Visit [Macmillan Cancer Support](#).



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