



Trouble Sleeping?

Getting Help Can Improve Your Health

A good night's sleep is important for everyone, but for cancer patients, sleeping soundly can be a real challenge. An estimated 80% of cancer patients experience poor sleep. Unfortunately, it's a problem that can have a negative impact on cancer treatment.

Cancer patients who are not sleeping well may feel pain more intensely and may be less likely to handle some treatments. Because sleep affects the immune system, sleep disruptions can also reduce the body's ability to fight infection. Sleep problems can be made worse by many factors, including pain, anxiety or depression, side effects of treatment or medications, and overnight hospital stays.

Identifying sleep disorders

According to the M. D. Anderson Sleep Center, sleep problems fall into six main categories: insomnia, disorders of the sleep-wake cycle, disorders associated with sleep stages or partial waking, excessive sleepiness, sleep-disordered breathing (such as sleep apnea, in which the sleeper stops breathing at times), and sleep-related movement disorders.

You might have a sleep disorder if you frequently:

- have problems falling or staying asleep
- sleep restlessly
- snore loudly
- awaken gasping or choking for breath
- feel tired when you wake up in the morning
- fall asleep while driving
- experience sleep that is disturbed by such unusual behavior as nightmares, sleepwalking, tongue biting, kicking, or eating

While some cancer patients develop sleep disorders because of their cancer

Keys to a Good Night's Sleep

To ensure that you get a good night's rest, experts at the American Cancer Society recommend that you:

- Get as much sleep as you feel your body needs, and try to exercise once a day.
- Discuss any fears related to your illness earlier in the day rather than just before bedtime.
- Create a quiet environment for sleep.
- Create a bedtime ritual, such as reading or taking a warm bath.
- Use deep breathing exercises or have someone give you a massage to relax your body.
- Drink warm, noncaffeinated drinks.
- Keep sheets clean and neatly tucked in.
- Take any required medication at a regular time.



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treatment, others have had an undiagnosed sleep disorder for years. Patients with all types of cancer often suffer from insomnia, sleep apnea, and restless legs, but those with the highest prevalence of sleep disorders are patients with head and neck, lung, or breast cancer.

To determine whether a cancer patient has a sleep disorder, a doctor will give a physical exam and take a medical history, asking about daytime and sleep habits, exercise routines, and medications. Sometimes a sleep test called a polysomnogram will be given. The test, which is conducted during an overnight stay at a sleep center, provides information about the patient's sleep stages, blood oxygen levels, breathing, muscle tone, heart rate, and general sleep behavior.

Treating sleep disorders

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A person suffering from sleep apnea might be treated with a continuous positive airway pressure (or CPAP) face mask, a device that helps keep the

airway open during sleep. Treatments for other sleep disorders might include making lifestyle changes to promote better sleep or medically treating another illness that contributes to sleep problems.

Medications for sleep disorders are usually only a short-term solution. More effective in the long run are managing stress and anxiety and treating a patient's fatigue.

Changing the sleep environment or sleep habits can also help. "Going to bed at the same time every night or only when you are sleepy and not watching television in bed can make a big difference," said Dave Balachandran, M.D., medical director of the M. D. Anderson Sleep Center. ●

For more information, talk to your physician, or:

- visit www.mdanderson.org/departments/sleepcenter
- call askMDAnderson at 1-877-632-6789

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