

# Sleep and pain

Information for you



Our bodies repair at night while we sleep. People with persistent pain often find that they have difficulty getting to sleep or waken frequently throughout the night.

In the dark, our whole attention is free to focus on the pain. This makes it much louder. Like the ticking of a clock that we don't notice till the lights are out. If we are not getting enough sleep and repair, this may contribute to the ill health and sensitivity of our tissues.

Many things may prevent good sleep, including:

- Napping during the day or sleeping late to 'catch up'
- Not doing enough during the day to get tired
- Worry, adrenaline and stress
- Alcohol, caffeine and smoking
- Staying up most of the night, in bed a lot of the day
- Pain

Whatever the initial cause, worrying about poor sleep and about feeling tired the next day are common reasons for the problem to become worse.

## What can I do to help improve poor sleep?

- Gradually increase your daytime activity levels (See the handout on Managing activity).

- Try not to nap / sleep during the day, no matter how tired you are.
- Try to go to bed at the same time every night when you feel sleepy.
- Try to get up at the same time each morning, regardless of how much time you slept during the night. Set your alarm clock.
- When trying to get to sleep, use distraction to fill your mind with something else. This leaves less room for the pain. It has to be something that takes a lot of concentration but is calming not exciting. Some people imagine they are lying on a nice beach, or try to remember the words of songs.
- If you have things on your mind, write them down in the early evening.
- Try to establish a quiet time before going to bed. A warm bath helps to relax your mind and your muscles. This may be a good time to practice your relaxation.
- Do not drink tea, coffee, fizzy drinks or alcohol for at least four hours before bedtime. Even smoking cigarettes can act as a stimulant.
- Make sure your bed is comfortable and you are not too warm. Use pillows for support if necessary.
- Try to sleep for most of the time you spend in bed. It is too easy to teach the

body and nervous system to be awake when you are in bed. This happens if you spend a lot of time lying in bed, trying to sleep. You end up tossing and turning, worrying about not getting enough sleep, clock watching, worrying about other things or even just reading or watching TV. Being asleep when you are in bed teaches your body and nervous system that sleeping is what happens in bed. It helps to keep to the fifteen minute rule: so if you haven't fallen asleep in about fifteen minutes, get up. Once you get up start your wind-down routine again and go back to bed when you feel sleepy.

Following this advice takes discipline and effort. Sleep and pain is part of a series of reliable, evidence-based advice to support you along the way to improving your function and quality of life, with pain.

Further information is available from:

Pain Association Scotland  
[www.painassociation.com](http://www.painassociation.com)

Scottish Chronic Pain Steering Group  
[www.knowledge.scot.nhs.uk/pain.aspx](http://www.knowledge.scot.nhs.uk/pain.aspx)

Pain Concern  
[www.painconcern.org.uk](http://www.painconcern.org.uk)