

Information about

# Sleep and Pain

One of the most commonly reported effects of persistent or chronic pain is **poor sleep**. In fact, in a recent survey of people attending a pain clinic, sleep problems were one of the main reasons why people were looking for help. We don't need to tell you about how poor sleep can have such a big effect on what you can do, even on top of the pain itself.

People tell us that pain keeps them awake night after night. A lack of sleep then affects what you can do during the day, with more tiredness and lethargy. And because you haven't slept during the night, many can find themselves dozing or sleeping during the day, right at the time when you'd like to be doing things. Some people take sleep when they can get it, and this often means that day turns into night, and you get little bouts of sleep here and there, which doesn't always make you feel properly rested. Others use sleep as a way of getting some peace from their pain, and some might take a little more medication in order to get off to sleep, even for a couple of hours. **Of course the pain clinic strongly advises against this.**

Many people with persistent pain report sitting up in bed late at night, wide awake, with a whole host of things going through their mind including worries, thoughts about the pain, concern that they're not getting enough sleep, and what they might be able to do about it. Others can find themselves shifting from bedroom, to sitting room, to kitchen, all the while trying to get into a comfortable position while not waking up other members of the family.

Does any of this sound familiar? Perhaps your sleep story is different, but you have tried lots and lots of things to help but nothing has worked. Sleeping tablets, trying not to sleep during the day, changing the times you take medication, sleeping in a different room. All that effort but still up most of the night?

The truth is there is no "one size fits all" remedy for poor sleep. But at the pain clinic we do find that a range of things can be helpful. We often start with a strange idea.

## **Actively trying to get or force yourself to sleep might in fact be part of the problem**

Have you ever noticed this? That the more you try to get yourself to sleep, the less likely you are to get to sleep? This can often be due to the fact that forcing yourself to sleep can lead to frustration, physical stimulation and agitation. The sorts of feelings that will keep you awake!

So however strange it might sound, encouraging you to “let go” of your active efforts to force sleep, might prove a better first step. There might be a few other things to do that might also help, but think of these in the spirit of just getting into a different routine, rather than expecting better sleep and thus forcing things again?

Be aware of your reactions to not getting to sleep. Thoughts, feelings, tension and constantly trying new positions may all be keeping you awake beyond the pain itself. Look to simply notice what is happening as you lie awake.

Routine can be helpful, and while it might be tricky at first, getting yourself into a habit of going to bed and rising at the same time, even if you don't get to sleep, might still be important. With routine, the brain releases chemicals as we go to bed which aid the sleep process.

Sometimes the bedroom can come to be dreaded as the place where you spend hours awake through the night. If this is the sort of association you have with it, this might also be adding to the problem. While it's probably the last thing you want to do, leaving the bedroom if you can't get to sleep might be a good plan. This way, you can return once you're starting to feel sleepy. You might have to do this a few times over several nights so it might not sound appealing. But this way you build up an association in your mind between the bedroom and sleepiness, making it more likely you will fall asleep there rather than come to hate the one place you should enjoy.

Does that make any sense? Keeping distracting things out of the bedroom might also help, even though things like phones, tablets and TV might feel like they're helping you pass the time.

No-one ever suffered permanent damage from a lack of sleep, but we know it can add to how much of a burden the pain can be. You may have to put in a bit of effort to change things for a while, so don't expect miracles initially. Don't let this leaflet put more pressure on you to get, or hope for, better sleep.

Better sleep often comes from the strangest of places, and often when we take the focus off it, and perhaps accept it for what it is, we find sleep returns.