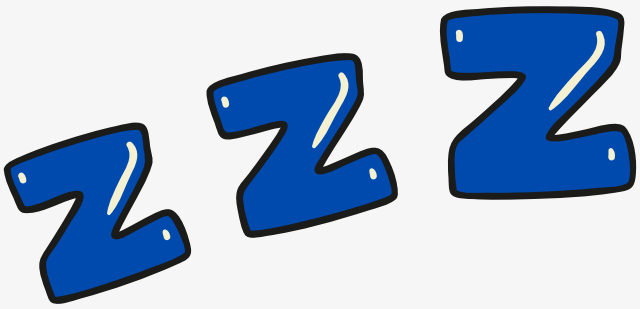
Problems sleeping?

The NHS Highland Pain Service is here to help

In this section we discuss four areas to help you improve your sleep.

Health
Environment
Lifestyle
Peace of mind



Introduction

People living with persistent pain often have difficulty sleeping. Long-term pain has made the body's nervous system more alert and sensitive making it harder to find a comfortable position to sleep in and 'switch off'. In order for us to fall asleep, our nervous system has to become calm and this is very difficult for people living with pain.

When you are in pain you need to work harder to calm the nervous system. Medication may help to reduce your pain levels but there are many other strategies that can help to calm the nervous system which do not require medication. You may have heard of 'sleep hygiene'. This is a term used to describe the environment and daily routines you can develop which will help to improve your sleeping patterns.

"Although it can feel as if a good night's sleep is impossible, there are changes you can make to your daily habits that will make a difference"

This workbook has been designed to help explain more about sleep and give you strategies to help you improve your sleep hygiene.

Health – anxiety and depression

We need sleep to help our bodies recover, repair, and restore itself. Mental health problems such as anxiety and depression can often lead to a disturbed night's sleep.

As a result, you may wake up feeling tired, irritable, low in mood and lacking the energy or motivation to do things. These feelings can make your depression and anxiety worse which, in turn, leads to more sleep problems. This is why it is important to have strategies in place to help you reduce your worries and encourage you to relax.

A good night's sleep can give your mental health a positive boost and help your overall recovery. However, it is not easy to 'switch your mind off', especially when you are in pain, but the pain service can help you with this. Mindfulness, 'the worry time method' and relaxation techniques can help. You may want to refer to the Managing your Emotions workbook in this series.

Environment

Your sleeping environment is very important. Light, temperature and noise can all play a part in disturbing your sleep. Most people know that blue screens, like TVs; mobile phones and computers are not good when you are trying to get to sleep.

The blue light that comes from these devices switches the brain 'on' when you want to switch it 'off'. For some people, even having these gadgets in the bedroom can stimulate the brain into thinking it's time to be awake. Your room should be quiet and not too hot or cold, for most people, this means a temperature of room 15.6°C and 19.4°C (60°F and 67°F). Ear plugs can help reduce noises and eyes masks can keep the room dark.

If you are sleeping with a partner and are worried about keeping them awake as you toss and turn, think about spending the night in a spare room. It is easier to go back to sleep when you are not worrying about keeping someone else awake. This need only be for a night or two, and it might give you (and your partner) a good night's sleep and help break the cycle. Not everyone will have a spare room but perhaps there is an alternative solution you could think of?

Lifestyle

Exercise

Regular exercise, like walking for 10 mins a day, can help improve your sleep patterns and can also help with sleep apnoea (a condition in which you experience pauses in breathing whilst you sleeping). This is because exercise has benefits on people's mental and physical wellbeing.

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that spending time in natural light (i.e outdoors) can help improve sleep quality.

However, it is important not to do vigorous exercise before you go to bed as this can produce hormones in the body that keep you awake. If the evening time is the only chance you get to exercise, you might want to try relaxing exercises like Tai Chi or yoga.

Diet

Caffeine can be found in tea, coffee, energy drinks, and chocolate. Everyone's tolerance for caffeine is slightly different and it can take anywhere between 3-7 hours for the effects to wear off. With this in mind, try to avoid caffeine at least 7 hours before you go to bed as it can cause a spike in your energy levels making it hard to get to sleep. Nicotine is also a powerful stimulant and so it can be difficult to get to sleep after smoking.

A lot of people try alcohol to help them sleep. Although this may seem like it works, unfortunately, the quality of sleep alcohol provides is poor which can leave you unrefreshed in the morning even if you have been in bed for hours.

Also, the body often wakes up at night as it tries to process the alcohol. A lack of sleep can stimulate hormones in your body that make you crave food. Eating more can lead to weight gain which can put added pressure on the body's joints causing or exacerbating pain.

Avoid before bed

Peace of Mind

Trying to relax and let go of stress before you go to bed is not easy. Everyone has had times when they have been kept awake because they can't 'switch off'.There is a lot of research that suggests if we feel like we have more control over our lives, we sleep better.

A bedtime routine is a pattern of behaviour that helps the brain recognise that it is time to sleep. The human brain loves patterns and when it recognises the activities in a bed-time routine the brain sends signals to the body that is time to wind down and rest. A bedtime routine can be anything from making a cup of warm milk to drink; or having a hot bath or shower, or it could be listening to a piece of relaxing music. The trick is to find out what works for you and make it a routine you do every night before bed.

As a general rule its best to start your routine 30-60mins before you got to bed.

Going to bed and waking up at the same time is also helpful in restoring good sleeping patterns. The reason for this is that it creates a 'sleep drive'. This 'drive' is a feeling of tiredness that builds throughout the day until you reach your 'bedtime' and the body and mind are ready for sleep.

'Sleep Drive'

If you wake up early, then sleep in the next day or stay up late and then go to bed early – the drive to sleep will become muddled and the body will not know if it's time to rest or if it should keep going.

Can't switch off? Try the worry time technique

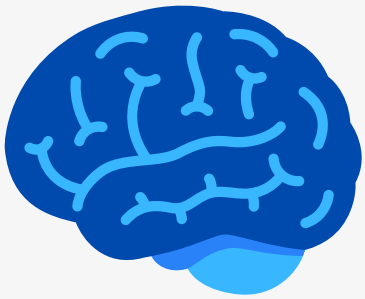
Some people find having had a busy day, being tired and ready for bed, that their minds suddenly start a spin cycle of thoughts, ideas and worries just when they want to go to sleep. Or perhaps this can happen on waking up during the night, feeling anxious about things.

Well, there's a wee bit more science to it, but that's the basic idea!

These thinking activities can be made worse by getting frustrated about how little time is left to sleep before getting up time. Trying to block thoughts or getting caught up in the cycle increases alertness and stress levels and keeps the person awake. And there are rarely any constructive solutions arrived at in a frustrated and tired state.

Like small children, your thoughts will get more insistent if you ignore them. And louder if you shout at them. So instead, try kindly noticing and making a deal with your thoughts.

"Thanks mind. I know you are just trying to warn me or figure something out. Now's not the time, though. If you are still there tomorrow at worry time, I promise to look at you then"



Once you have made the deal, overlay thoughts by mentally scanning your body from toes to head, muscle group by muscle group and letting go of any tension you notice there. If you get distracted, thank your mind once more, and gently return to whatever part of your body you were on.This way you reduce your tension, your alertness, your adrenaline response, and set up the best conditions for rest, and even sleep.

The next day, set aside a 20 minute period where you can attend to the worries or plans, preferably not anywhere near bedtime. Have a pen and paper handy, and set the timer on your watch or phone for 20 minutes to do constructive problem solving. Note any thoughts that come up from the cycle at the top, and what you want to achieve at the bottom of the page. Make some steps between. At the end of the 20 minutes, stop. Stand up, move around, do something different. You might carry out some steps during the day if you choose, but worry time is over. Any outstanding ones can be carried over till the next day's worry time.

If the worries aren't there at worry time, don't dig.They weren't that important after all. No need to write worries down in the middle of the night so you don't forget. Often in the cold light of day they no longer seem so significant.

If you really can't sleep, don't stay in bed awake for too long – get up, make yourself some warm milk - this has a tryptophan in it, which combined with the carbohydrate in the milk helps to put your brain to sleep.

Tryptophan can also be found in nuts, like cashews, almonds, and pistachios as well as pumpkin seeds and sesame seeds. Beans, lentils, and chicken are also good sources of this sleep-helping molecule, Tryptophan.

I'm too tired to think straight!

Recognising which area (Health, Exercise, Lifestyle, Peace of Mind) you need to work on to improve your sleep patterns can be hard. It is common for people to need help in all four areas. The pain service will often recommend keeping a sleep diary so you can look for patterns that could help you find out what the cause of the problem might be.

Sleep/Activity Diary

For many people living with persistent pain, being asked to keep a sleep diary may seem like a pointless exercise. "I know why I can't sleep, I'm in pain!". However, combining a sleep diary with an activity journal might help to spot patterns that explain why your sleep is bad.

I know why I can't sleep. I'm in pain!

For instance, many people are surprised with what they get up to during the day when they write it all down. You may feel like you have 'done nothing' but when you see it all, down on the page, you may realise that you have been quite busy pottering around the house and that has led to an increase in pain and disturbed sleep.

Similarly, you may not notice that you have had so many cups of tea during the day and your system is full of caffeine even though your last cup was hours before bedtime. The same could be said about nicotine if you smoke.

Napping

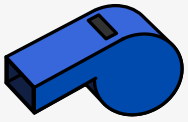
When you have had a sleepless night, the temptation is to sleep during the day to make up for it. Whilst napping can help to reduce fatigue, boost energy levels, and generally make you feel better, it can also make your sleepless nights worse.This section gives you advice on how to nap the 'right' way.

If you take a short nap in the day, it doesn't usually interfere with your night-time sleep. However, taking frequent naps or napping for longer than 20mins can affect your ability to sleep at night.

A good general guide for napping is as follows:

Don't nap too long – aim to nap for between 10-20mins. This will make sure you don't wake up feeling groggy and grumpy.

Nap in the early afternoon – although there are many factors that might determine when a good time is for you to nap (for instance you might work nightshifts, or you may need to take your medication at a certain time of day).General advice would be to not nap after 3pm in the afternoon.



Make naps a routine – Many people find it hard to nap but practise makes perfect. Even if you do not manage to sleep, taking 10mins a day to rest in a quiet, dark, comfortable room, will get your body use to taking this 'time out'. You may find that, over time, you start to drift off as your body and brain gets use to this new routine.

Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA)

This is form of sleep-disordered breathing. Typically, people with type of sleep apnoea experience frequent pauses in their breath lasting around 10 seconds or longer when they are asleep. This happens when the muscles in the upper airway relax and narrow, or collapse entirely, which reduces the amount of airflow into the lungs.

A reduced airflow means oxygen levels decrease which causes the body to 'waken'. A person may not wake completely but these 'micro arousals' means an unsettled and restless night which can leave person tired and irritable the next day.

A common treatment for OSA is CPAP therapy. CPAP stands for 'continued positive airway pressure' and typically means a person needs to wear a mask at night attached to a machine that blows air into the nose/and or mouth throughout the night to keep their airways open.

To begin with, sleeping with a CPAP mask can be difficult. The sensation of air being pushed into the nose and mouth can be uncomfortable, the mask may feel tight, and many people report a feeling of claustrophobia. As a result, it is very common for people to abandon using the mask at night because the 'cure' is worse than the condition.

However, people who have stuck with the mask admit that they get a better night's sleep when they wear it and feel much better the next day as a result. We have already outlined the reason why a good night's sleep is so important.

In the following section we give you a few tips to help people get used to wearing their CPAP mask.

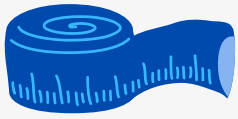
Tips and Tricks

1. **Build up slowly**

It's unlikely that, in the beginning, you will be able to tolerate a full 8 hours of mask-wearing at night. Start with small goals e.g. wear the mask whilst watching the first half of a football match on TV or a half hour show on Netflix. You could also try wearing the mask around the house and with the airflow on the lowest setting.

2. **Get the right fit**

It's important that the mask is a good fit for you – it should be snug, but not too tight. If you feel like it is too small or big, contact your respiratory nurse and request an assessment. Over time it is likely the straps will need to be adjusted again so be mindful to check them regularly.

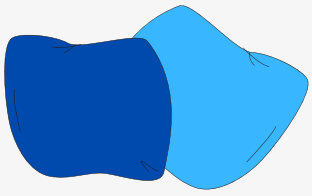


3. **Humidity**

Even though the airflow coming from the CPAP machine is humidified it can still cause the throat and nose to become dry.If this is the case, you may find it beneficial to use a nasal saline spray (which you can get in the chemist) or an additional humidifier at night.

4. **Raise the head of the bed**

Purchasing a bed with an adjustable head can improve the symptoms of OSA but this might be out of the price range for many people. However, sleeping with a wedge pillow that raises your head and shoulders into more of an inclined position can help to keep the airways open and makes the CPAP therapy a little more comfortable.



5. **CPAP Pillow**

Tubing and masks can get caught on a standard pillow. CPAP pillows have a 'cut out' which allows the tubing to drop into the indentation and not get pushed out of position. This reduces the amount of air leakage. The pillow also allows people to move positions in the night (i.e., lying on their back to side lying) without the mask and tubing getting tangled.

Sleeping in a recliner chair

Some people with back or neck pain, as well as those people with breathing issues, report that sleeping in a recliner chair is more comfortable than sleeping in a bed. If sleeping in a chair – one in which you can recline the head and elevate the feet – is the only way you can manage to get a good night's rest then there is an argument to be said that this is what you should do. However, it is important that you are aware of the pros and cons.

Pros

+ As was mentioned in the obstructive sleep apnoea section; sleeping in a position with your upper body slightly elevated may help to keep the airways open and make the CPAP therapy more comfortable.
+ This position may also help with severe heartburn or acid reflux.
+ People with Osteoporosis and osteoarthritis might not be able to get the joint support they need in bed to be comfortable so may prefer a recliner chair.
+ Similarly, people with severe back or neck pain may not be able to get comfortable in bed and sleeping in a recliner can reduce the stress on the spine and muscles.

Cons

- Sleeping in a reclined position can increase your risk of developing joint contractures as you knees and hips are kept flexed at one angle for a long period of time. If the knees and hips stiffen into a bent position this can lead to difficulties with functional tasks like walking and getting up out of a chair for instance.
- If you fall asleep with a gap between your lower back and the chair, this can strain the back leading to more pain – make sure you put a supportive cushion or towel behind you.
- If your neck rolls to one side when you are asleep or if the recliner is in a more upright position this can lead to strain your neck.
- If you sleep in an upright position this can lead to fluid collecting in the lower limbs with increases the swelling in the legs and the chances of developing a blood clot.
- Sleeping in one position and being unable to fully stretch out can lead to a shallow and unsatisfying sleep – making you tired and sore when you wake.

Sleep well to live well

Although it can feel as if a good night's sleep is impossible, there are changes you can make to your daily habits that will make a difference. Along with exercise and a healthy diet, sleeping well, can lead to lower pain levels.

The strategies we have outlined in this workbook will take time and practise before they become a regular part of your daily life. However, by sticking with them, you will see an improvement in your mental and physical wellbeing.

For more information you may find the following links useful:

Sleep

https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/mental-health-self-help-guides/sleep-problems-and-insomnia-self-help-guide

https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/information-support/adults/sleep-hub/sleep-patterns/

http://www.silverbirchmedicalpractice.co.uk/downloads/Moodjuice%20Sleep%20Self%20Help%20Guide.pdf

Obstructive sleep apnoea

https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/lungs-and-airways/obstructive-sleep-apnoea