

SLEEP AND CHRONIC PAIN

When living with chronic pain, it can be challenging to get a good night's sleep. 50-80% of people with persistent pain report trouble with sleep (Whale & Gooberman-Hill, 2022). You may find it difficult to fall asleep or may wake up often through the night. Even if you get the right amount of sleep, you may still feel tired in the morning due to poor sleep quality. Ongoing poor sleep can lead to increased pain, stress, low mood, poor immune function, cognitive and memory decline, and so on. The good news is that we can improve our sleep. Pain and sleep are linked. If we work on our sleep, we may be able to positively impact our pain. The following information and resources can help you build better sleep habits so you can improve your overall sleep quality.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

In addition to pain, you may experience a number of additional barriers to good sleep such as medications, stress, worry, housing conditions, shift work, not feeling safe, stimulants (i.e., caffeine), etc. Some barriers to sleep may be outside of your control, while others are within. **'Sleep hygiene'** refers to the thing you CAN do during the day that can improve sleep. By addressing barriers to sleep that are within your control and establishing sleep-promoting habits, you can improve your overall sleep quality. Below are some steps you may consider taking to improve your sleep hygiene:

1. Only go to bed when you're sleepy

Make the association between "bed" and "sleep" strong. Your bed should only be used for sleeping and sex. Refrain from reading books, watching TV, or resting in bed. Find somewhere other than the bedroom to rest during the day. This also means not allowing yourself to toss and turn in bed feeling frustrated about being awake. If more than 20 minutes have passed and you have not fallen asleep, get out of bed and try a quiet, non-stimulating activity until you feel sleepy and can try again. This concept is a key component of **Sleep Restriction Therapy** which is often used in the treatment of insomnia which focuses on the time spent in bed to closely match amount of actual sleep, rather than simply trying to sleep longer.

2. Relaxation

Establish a calming routine before bed. Use relaxation techniques such as meditating, taking a warm bath or shower, performing a series of gentle stretches, or listening to an audiobook. If you wake up and can't get back sleep, you may consider trying a sleep exercise such as counting sheep, visualizing a dream, or deep breathing to fall back asleep.

3. Sleep and wake times

Go to bed and wake at the same time every day, including holidays and weekends. This helps with the sleep rhythm required for melatonin production; melatonin is a hormone that promotes sleep. Avoid daytime naps, unless you find a nap is required to complete your daily activities; if a nap is required, try to take a short one in the morning (between 15-20 minutes in duration). You may consider keeping a [sleep journal](#) or use a [sleep app](#) to become more aware of your sleeping habits and develop a better sleeping schedule.

4. Diet

Your diet can impact your sleep. Here are some things to consider:

- Avoid heavy, fatty or sugary foods before bed.
- Avoid caffeine (i.e., coffee, soda) and chocolate 4 hours before bed. Caffeine lasts in your system for a long time and may interfere with your sleep.
- It can be helpful to have a light snack before bed (drinking milk can be sleep promoting).

5. Exercise

Exercise can impact your sleep. Engaging in exercise during the day, even low levels, can be beneficial to your sleep. Avoid exercising 2-3 hours before going to bed, as it will increase heart rate and body temperature which can make it more difficult to sleep.

6. Room environment

People living with chronic pain are reportedly more likely than those not living with pain to say environmental factors make it more difficult for them to get a good night's sleep. Here are some things to consider for optimizing your sleep environment:

- Make sure the bedroom is dark and quiet, and at a comfortable temperature (i.e., consider light blocking curtains, eye shades, using a sound machine or ear plugs, changing pillows, sheets, and pajamas in accordance with the season, etc.).
- Increase sunlight exposure during the day. The greater the difference between daytime light and evening darkness the more melatonin the body produces.
- Limit exposure to white or blue light before bedtime and in the middle of the night (i.e., TV, cellphones and other devices).
- Adjusting sleep positions may also be supportive in getting a good night's rest. Pillow support, mattress choice, and finding the right sleeping position (back, reclined, side, etc.) can help alleviate pain when sleeping. You may consider consulting with a healthcare professional such as your primary care provider, physiotherapist, chiropractor, or a sleep clinic for guidance on sleep positions that are right for you.

MOOD, ANXIETY, AND SLEEP

Sleep can be affected by expectations, thoughts, worries, and stress. When we are stressed or consumed in thought, this activates your nervous system and will make it more difficult for you to fall asleep. Below are some helpful tips you may consider addressing worry so you can get a better night's sleep:

When you worry about not sleeping. People with pain can feel they have less control over their sleep, worry about lack of sleep affecting their health and experience greater sleep sensitivity. Here are some strategies to consider utilizing to help decrease your worry about sleep:

- One of the things that can increase our anxiety about not sleeping, is watching the clock. Consider removing the clock from your bedroom. If you need an alarm to wake you, turn the clock around so you can't see the time.
- When you can't sleep, it can be helpful to remember that this is a natural side effect of pain. Acknowledging and normalizing that you have some sleep difficulties may help to reduce the distress that you may be feeling.
- When you are having difficulties sleeping, get out of bed and try a quiet, non-stimulating activity (i.e., meditate, listen to an audio story, etc.) until you feel sleepy and try again.

- You may consider accessing counselling, apps, or online learning tools that utilize Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Insomnia (CBTI) to improve your sleep. CBTI is a non-pharmacological treatment for insomnia that provides strategies that can help you to change your behaviour and thinking patterns around sleep.

Thoughts that keep repeating in your head can also keep you awake. Sometimes you may be kept awake by other thoughts. This can often happen during times of high stress. Here are some strategies to consider utilizing to help decrease worry when trying to sleep:

- Mindfulness and relaxation strategies to regulate the nervous system, again, can be supportive. To learn more about nervous system regulation strategies, click [here](#).
- You may also consider writing down your thoughts and assure yourself that you will address them in the morning.

When to seek additional support. Mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety, can impact sleep quality. Accessing support for depression and anxiety may have a positive impact on your sleep, mood, and overall pain. For more information about finding mental health supports for chronic pain, click [here](#).

For immediate mental health support, you may consider contacting the following:

- Suicide Crisis Helpline: 9-8-8 or 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)
- BC Mental Health Support Line: 310-6789 (no area code)
- KUU-US Crisis Response Service (for Indigenous, Metis and Inuit people): 1-800-588-8717
- Hope For Wellness (for Indigenous, Metis and Inuit people): 1-855-242-3310

MEDICATIONS AND SLEEP

Certain medications can help with improving sleep but are not always recommended as a stand-alone treatment. Medications may be useful for short-term use to help reset your sleep habits and break problematic cycles such as napping.

Long-term use of medications for sleep may:

- Reduce the quality of sleep by decreasing the amount of time spent in deep sleep

- May interfere with alertness during the day, contributing to forgetfulness

Medications for sleep can also have unhelpful interactions with some pain medications. Speak with your primary care provider and/or pharmacist about your options if you think you would benefit from medication to help manage sleep.

Some prescribed medications for chronic pain can have negative effects on sleep. They may disrupt your sleep, be a stimulant, or decrease how restorative your sleep is. If you have concerns about your prescribed medications interfering with your sleep, discuss your options with your primary care provider and/ or pharmacist.

WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP FOR SLEEP

Some individuals may have additional factors that are preventing a good night's rest. A sleep disorder is a medical condition that disrupts the quality, timing, or amount of sleep. Examples of common sleep disorders include insomnia, obstructive sleep apnea, circadian rhythm disorders, and restless leg syndrome. If you think you may have a sleep disorder, speak with your primary care provider about your options.

RESOURCES

- [Pain Support Line](#): Call or text 1-833-261-7246
- Sleep by LivePlanBe+: liveplanbeplus.ca/course/sleep
- Coaching for Health: painbc.ca/coaching
- Pain Support and Wellness Groups: painbc.ca/supportgroups
- Empowered Relief®: paincanada.ca/resources/empowered-relief
- Making Sense of Pain: Online: painbc.ca/msop
- Sleep by Pain U Online, Toronto Academic Pain Medicine Institute: tapmipain.ca/patient/managing-my-pain/pain-u-online/sleep.html
- Sleeping Well Despite Pain, Dr. Joshua Rash, PhD RPsych: vimeo.com/855031683
- Improving Sleep to Manage Pain, CCDP Sleep: liveplanbe.ca/pain-education/sleep-rest/sleep-hygiene
- Sleep and Pain, painHEALTH: painhealth.com.au/pain-module/sleep-and-pain

- Guidelines to Sleep Restriction, Stanford Medicine:
med.stanford.edu/content/dam/sm/insomnia/documents/cbtigroup/Guidelines-to-Sleep-Restriction.pdf
- Insomnia Coach: ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/insomnia_coach.asp
- SleepEZ: veterantraining.va.gov/sleep/index.asp
- My SleepWell: mysleepwell.ca
- Sleep Doctor: sleepdoctor.com
- Learn Ten Tips for Improving Sleep Efficiency and Sleep Quality, Dr. Andrea Furlan:
youtube.com/watch?v=ygYqW5GiBkY
- MindSpace, CBT Skills for Insomnia: mind-space.ca
- Pain BC Information Sheet, Mental Health and Chronic Pain:
<https://painbc.ca/sites/default/files/2025-10/PBC%20Factsheet%20-%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Pain%20-%20Final.pdf>
- Pain BC Information Sheet, Stress and Chronic Pain: painbc.ca/stressandchronicpain
- Pain BC Information Sheet, Finding a Mental Health Counsellor for Chronic Pain:
<https://painbc.ca/sites/default/files/2026-02/PBC%20Factsheet%20-%20Finding%20a%20Mental%20Health%20Counsellor%20-%20Final%20%281%29.pdf>
- Pain BC Information Sheet, Finding a Physiotherapist to Manage Chronic Pain:
painbc.ca/sites/default/files/2025-12/PBC%20Factsheet%20-%20Finding%20a%20Physiotherapist%20-%20Final.pdf
- Pain BC Information Sheet, Finding an Occupational Therapist to Manage Chronic Pain:
<https://painbc.ca/sites/default/files/2025-12/PBC%20Factsheet%20-%20Finding%20an%20Occupational%20Therapist%20-%20Final.pdf>
- Change Pain, MSP Virtual Groups: changepain.ca/services/msp-virtual-group-medical-visits
- Pain Recovery, MSP Group Medical Visits: painrecovery.ca
- Vancouver Coastal Health, Arthritis Education: Register for free online classes to help you manage your arthritis: vch.ca/en/health-topics/arthritis-education#short-description--20446
- UBC Pharmacists Clinic: pharmsci.ubc.ca/pharmacists-clinic/services/patients
- Managing Pain Before and After Surgery: paincanada.ca/course/managing
- Pathways, Community Service Directory: pathwaysbc.ca/community
- Pain BC, Find Help Directory: painbc.ca/find-help/resources/directory

- Power Over Pain Portal: portal.poweroverpain.ca
- Self-Management BC: www.selfmanagementbc.ca

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Toronto Academic Medicine Institute (TAPMI). (n.d.). Sleep. Retrieved May 14, 2026 from <https://tapmipain.ca/patient/managing-my-pain/pain-u-online/sleep.html>

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