

# How to Sleep well with pain

If you're living with pain and struggling with sleep then you're not alone. It's very common for people with persistent pain to have difficulties getting to sleep or staying asleep.

## Why can't I sleep?

It's likely that there are a number of causes of your sleep difficulties. Here are six triggers often found by people living with pain:



## A vicious cycle

You have probably discovered that poor sleep can have some unhelpful effects on your day-to-day life.

After a broken night's sleep you may find:

- it's harder to concentrate
- you are short tempered with other people
- your mood is low

It's very common for people to find that poor sleep makes their pain seem worse. They can find themselves in a vicious cycle where pain makes sleeping difficult, and poor sleep worsens pain.

The really good news is that there are lots of ways to improve your sleep.

## The good news

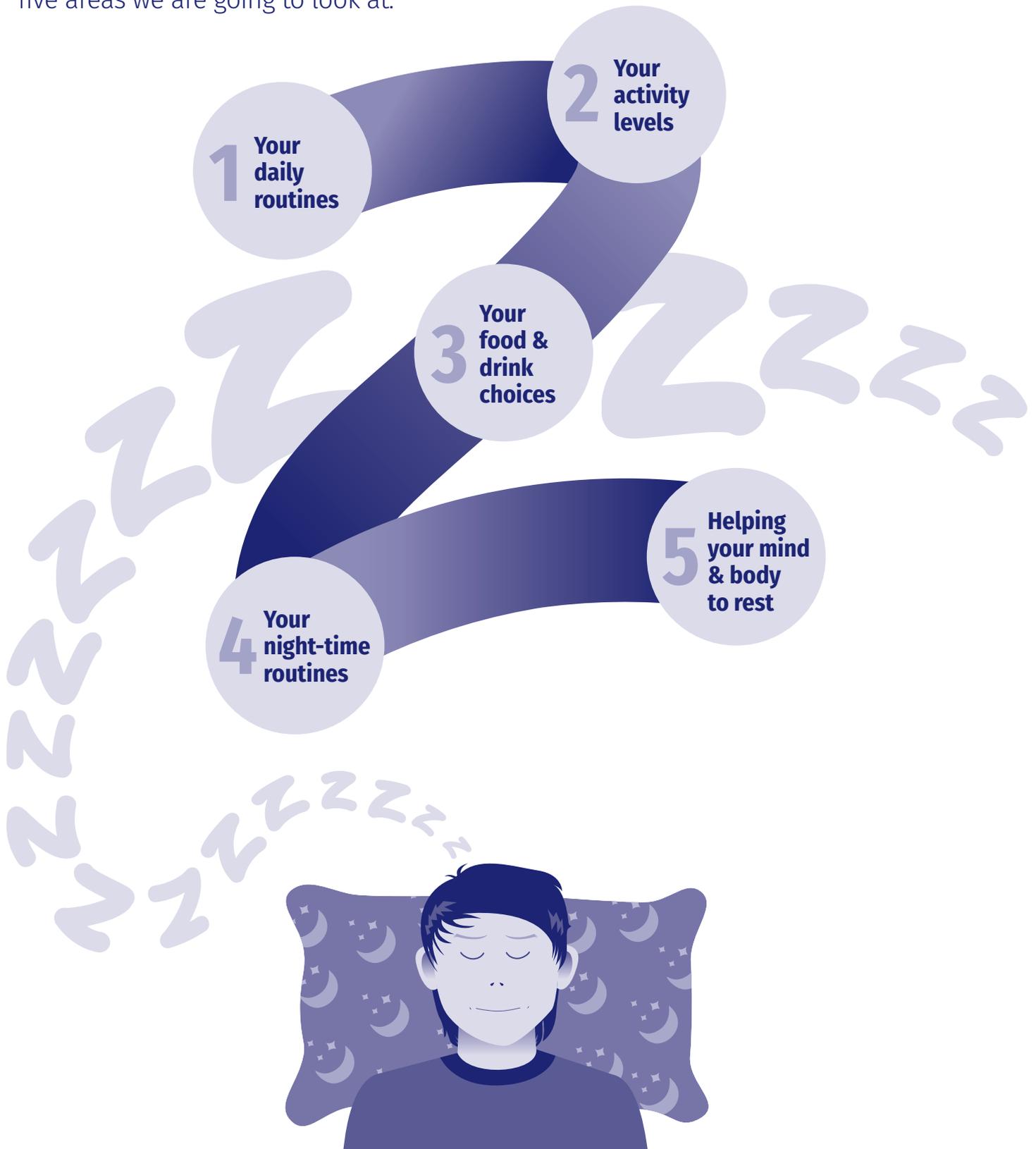
Thanks to recent research, we now know that sleeping well with pain is possible, with a different approach and maybe a few new skills.

Over the next few pages we will share with you some ideas and techniques that other people living with pain have found helpful. We're going to look at **five areas** of your life and suggest some simple changes that you can make to your activities and routines.

Some things you can try out straight away; others may need a bit more thought and planning. So we're also going to show you how to set some **sleep well goals** and then create a plan so that you can get going.

## The five areas

There are lots of changes you can make to help you to sleep well. Over a period of five to six weeks these can make a huge difference. Here are the five areas we are going to look at:



# 1 Your daily routines

To understand why daily routines matter it's useful to know a bit about how sleep is controlled by your body. Two systems in your body are important: your **body clock** and your **sleep drive**.

## What is your body clock?

Your body clock is a 24-hour internal clock that helps your body to be alert or sleepy at different times of the day or night. Your body clock needs to be 'set' regularly. The things that help to set your body clock are sunlight and daily activities. If you spend a lot of time resting indoors because of your pain, then your body clock can get confused.

## What is your sleep drive?

Your sleep drive gradually increases over the course of the day. It is at its lowest when you first wake up. The drive for sleep then increases as you spend more and more hours awake. Eventually, after you have been awake for a long period (usually around 16 hours) you will have a strong need for sleep.

## Think of them as your friends

Imagine your body clock and your sleep drive as your 'sleep friends'. They are there to help you to sleep well. To keep them in balance, these are the things that you can do...

- **Get into a regular routine:** make sure that each day you *go to bed, get up, eat meals and do activities* around the same times. Try to stick to your routine no matter whether it is a weekday or a weekend and what kind of sleep you had the previous night.
- **Avoid napping:** if possible, avoid taking naps during the day. This can be difficult – you may feel very drowsy because of your medication or be tired because you've had a restless night. If you feel like you absolutely 'must' sleep, then keep your nap short – around 15 minutes at most.
- **Avoid using your bedroom to rest in the daytime:** If you need to take some time out because of your pain, then try to find another place in the house to rest or do a relaxation activity.

### How much sleep do I need?

- A 'normal' night's sleep can be anywhere between 5 and 10 hours
- It's a myth that we all need 8 hours sleep – this is an average. We all have different sleep times.
- How much sleep you need will vary and depends on your age and your situation
- We need less sleep as we get older, around 6 to 6½ hours is a typical sleep time
- Sleeping too much can be unhelpful



## 2 Your activity levels

Like many people with persistent pain, you may be avoiding physical activity because you are worried it will make your pain worse.

These fears are normal and understandable – when you live with pain, the last thing that you want to do is aggravate it further! It may be encouraging for you to know that getting fit and staying active is actually good for your pain *and* for your sleep.

Here are some of the ways physical activity can help your sleep:

- **You'll feel less sleepy in the day**
- **It increases your drive for sleep at night**
- **It can ease stress and tension**
- **It helps to keep your 'body clock' in balance**

### What kinds of physical activity should I do?

It helps if your activity routine includes..

- **Regular stretching:** this will help to loosen tight muscles, ligaments and joints, increase your flexibility and improve your posture
- **Strengthening:** this will help you to stand and walk for longer, get out of chairs more easily and walk up stairs. It will also improve your balance and reduce your chance of falls
- **Stamina activities:** these will help you to do things for longer without more pain or tiredness.

To start or maintain a regular activity routine, there are a number of things that you can do:

- **Learn the skill of pacing:** pacing is a really useful skill as it guides you to do the level of activity that is right for your body. When you pace your activity, you take a break before pain, tiredness or exhaustion forces you to stop.
- **Do physical activities that you enjoy:** quite simply, if you enjoy what you're doing then you'll be more motivated to keep it up. This could be anything from taking a morning walk through to swimming, playing badminton or gentle Tai Chi or Yoga guided by an App.
- **Try to do some activities outside:** being in the daylight during the day helps your body clock to be in balance with day and night time patterns. It can help with stressful feelings too.
- **Avoid energetic activities shortly before sleep:** exercising late in the day 'wakes up' your body and so it can lead to problems falling asleep or staying asleep. To help with sleep, the best time to exercise is late in the afternoon or early evening.

Regular activity and relaxation is good for your pain – and your sleep!



### 3 Your food & drink choices

There are many simple changes you can make to your eating and drinking habits in the evening to help yourself sleep well. Here are some suggestions for you to explore:

- **Avoid caffeine in the evening.** Caffeinated drinks, like tea, coffee and cola can have a stimulating effect on your body. Usually this lasts for around 4-5 hours. So it's best to stop caffeine from late afternoon onwards to help you sleep well. Lots of things contain caffeine, such as chocolate, fizzy drinks and even some medicines. So it makes sense to read the labels of anything you eat or drink in the evening.
- **Try not to drink too much just before you go to bed.** It may help to limit yourself to sips of water if you are thirsty before bed or in the night. Remember, too much fluid could cause you to wake up and head for the bathroom.
- **Avoid drinking alcohol late in the evening.** Alcohol can get in the way of a good night's sleep. It has a dehydrating effect which can cause you to wake up feeling thirsty. It can also interrupt the pattern of your sleep. It turns out that after drinking alcohol, you sleep more lightly and wake up more easily, especially in the second part of the night.
- **Eat your main meal earlier in the evening and have a small snack just before you go to bed.** If you have an empty stomach when you go to bed you might wake up hungry in the night. On the other hand, if you eat a big meal late at night then your body may be too busy digesting your food or coping with heartburn to rest easily.
- **If you are awake in the night, then avoid snacking –** this could be training your body to wake up because it expects food. You could have a soothing drink instead – try herbal teas such as chamomile or peppermint, or warm milk.

*Your food and drink choices  
can make the difference  
between this...*



*... and this!*



## 4 Your night-time routines

The things that you do leading up to bed time can help your mind and body get ready to sleep well. We tell children this and yet we forget this applies to adults too!

Getting into a regular wind-down routine will help your body to relax. It can also sooth any worries you may be having about sleep in the night ahead. Making sure that your bedroom is 'fit for sleep' is important too.

Here are some ideas to explore:

- **Follow a wind-down routine every evening.** Start by setting a wind-down time around 1 to 1 ½ hours before bed. After this time, do things that help you to relax. This might be taking a bath, watching TV, listening to music or reading a book/magazine.
- **Only go to your room when it is time to sleep.** Don't go up earlier to watch TV in bed, go on the internet or mobile phone or do any paperwork. If you do non-sleep activities in bed then your brain is learning that it is okay to be awake and alert in bed.
- **Get the temperature right.** Being too hot can cause restlessness and being too cold can make it difficult to sleep. Explore making changes to your bedding to find the best mix of layers to sleep well. Try a fan or heater on a timer if your bedroom temperature seems to be a problem.
- **Make sure your room is dark.** When it's dark, our bodies release melatonin which helps us to relax and fall asleep. You can block out light from outside by using blackout curtains or blinds. It can also help to cover up any light sources such as alarm clocks. Some people find it helps to wear an eye mask.

### Planning a regular sleep pattern

This is a technique that many people with sleep find useful. It helps to keep your body clock and your sleep drive in balance. Here are the four steps:

- 1 First, think about how many hours of sleep you need. Remember, everyone is different so try to think about how many hours you slept when you last had a 'good night'.
- 2 Next decide what time you want to get up every morning.
- 3 Now take away your sleep hours from your getting up time. This is your new time to go to bed to sleep.
- 4 From now on, make sure that you go to bed at this time every night and get up at the same time every morning.

Getting into a regular routine can be very tricky at first. Try not to be tempted to go to bed earlier if you feel tired or press the snooze button on your alarm in the morning. Over several weeks, people find that when they keep to a routine like this, they fall asleep more easily and wake less in the night.

Once you are used to this new sleeping pattern, you can make small changes. For instance, you may want to try to increase your sleeping hours a little by going to bed 30 minutes earlier. Just make sure you don't make too many changes and give your body clock time to get used to the new routine before you change it again.

good night's sleep 7 hrs  
get up time 6.30am  
 $6.30\text{am} - 7\text{ hrs} = 11.30\text{pm}$   
So go to bed by 11.30pm to  
get a good night's sleep

## 5 Helping your mind & body to rest

Making sure that your bedroom is 'fit for sleep' can make a big difference. But you may still find that it is difficult to relax in bed as your mind is racing or your body is tense.

When you are living with pain, a good bed and the right sleeping position is important. It gives your spine support and will help your body to rest. Learning and regularly using simple relaxation skills also helps soothe your mind.

Here are some suggestions for you to think about:

- **Make sure you have a good bed.** To find out more about beds and mattresses visit [www.sleepcouncil.org.uk](http://www.sleepcouncil.org.uk)
- **To find a comfortable position, you may need more pillows or cushions so your body feels relaxed.**
- **Use relaxation techniques to help you feel calm and quieten your mind.** It can be very common to lie in bed worrying about how much sleep you are going to get. Distracting and calming your mind can really help with this – try out some of our suggestions on the right to discover which work best for you.
- **Avoid checking the time during the night.** Some people find that they keep checking the time if they can't get to sleep or if they wake up in the night. This can increase worrying and make it harder to sleep. If you tend to do this, then cover your clock or put it away from your bed so that you can't see it.
- **If you wake up in the night – don't struggle.** It's very common to feel frustrated or worried if you wake up in the night – letting go of this struggle is a way of being kind to yourself. People find that different techniques help with this. Some people use relaxation techniques, other people find it helps to get out of bed after 15–20 minutes and do something that is calming in a different room. It can also help to simply lie in bed and accept that 'sleep will come when it's ready.'

Forget about it!  
Sleep will come when  
it's ready



### Simple relaxation techniques

Anyone can learn relaxation techniques with a bit of guidance and some regular practice. There are lots of techniques you could try. Here are a few that people living with pain have said can be helpful:

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)** – this is a set of exercises that you can do when you are lying in bed. It involves deliberately tensing your muscles and then relaxing them and noticing how the tension melts away. There is a recommended sequence to follow, starting with one foot and moving gradually up to your face.

**Belly breathing** – this involves learning to breathe slowly and deeply from your belly. To practice, put a hand on your stomach and feel it rise as you breathe in. Then relax your chest and shoulders as you breathe out. Concentrate on your breathing and try to slow down your breaths using counting. This is then repeated for 10 times or more.

**Visual imagery** – choose peaceful or soothing images to focus on or run through a soothing 'story' in your mind.

**Soothing sounds** – some people find it helpful to play soothing sounds in the background to help them to relax in bed. It's possible to buy sleep sound machines or download Apps that play rhythmic sounds, a melody or even 'white noise'.

For more information about these techniques visit [www.ntw.nhs.uk/resource-library/relaxation-techniques](http://www.ntw.nhs.uk/resource-library/relaxation-techniques)

## Putting it into practice – creating your own sleep well plan

Now that you have some ideas about things that can help you to sleep well, it's time to make a sleep well plan.

Making a plan will help you to focus on a few goals at a time rather than trying to achieve too many things at once. Share it with someone, or write it down, as this can help you to stick with it.

Over the page you'll find a blank plan for you to use.

Before you begin, have a look at the example below. It suggests examples of the kinds of things you could write in your own plan. But it's important that the ones you add are right for you (see box, right, for the 'REST test').

Sometimes it's easier to make your plan with someone else – if you're struggling, why not ask your doctor or pain management team to help you come up with a plan that works for you?

It is likely to take a few weeks for your new activities and routines to make a difference. So keep going and you will soon discover that it is possible to *sleep well with pain!*

### Does your plan pass the REST test?

**REALISTIC:** Be realistic about what is possible so that you give yourself every chance of success. For example, rather than trying to learn three different relaxation techniques at once, just focus on one to start with and practice it for at least two weeks.

**ENJOYABLE:** The more enjoyable your goal is, the more likely you are to succeed. For example, if you decide to stop drinking caffeinated drinks at night, replace them with drinks you really like.

**SPECIFIC:** The more detailed your plan is, the more likely it is to happen. So, if you are going to do some physical activities, plan exactly what you are going to do and when.

**TIMED:** Create routines that are good for your sleep by doing things at a time that's right for you. Give things a try for a few weeks before adding in something new.

Jo's sleep plan for the next two weeks				
	My sleep well goals	What I will do		
1 My daily routines	Do things that help me to avoid napping	If I feel tired, I'll go for a <del>long run</del> short walk	In the afternoon	Talk to my doctor about the drowsy side effects of my medication
2 My activity levels	Do some stretching exercises	Learn and practice 5 different stretching exercises	Before lunch every day	Find out from Jenny which ones she finds helpful
3 My food & drink choices	Eat my evening meal earlier	Eat my evening meal by 6.30pm	Start preparing the meal around <del>6pm</del> 5.30pm	Get everyone else on board with this so I don't eat alone
4 My night-time routines	Find some comfortable sleeping positions	Experiment with different sleeping positions to discover which work best for me	When I am in bed. If it doesn't work after a few nights – try something else	Maybe buy some more pillows or cushions to give me support in bed
5 Helping my mind & body to rest	Learn how to use Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)	Use PMR at night time when I am in bed	Practice it every night when I go to bed and if I wake up in the night	Ask Terry which Apps helped him to learn relaxation

## My sleep well plan

	My sleep well goals	What I will do	When I will do it	What I need to help me
<p><b>1</b> My daily routines</p>				
<p><b>2</b> My activity levels</p>				
<p><b>3</b> My food &amp; drink choices</p>				
<p><b>4</b> My night-time routines</p>				
<p><b>5</b> Helping my mind &amp; body to rest</p>				

More useful resources

## Sleep resources

### Books

**Overcoming Insomnia and Sleep Problems** Colin Espie (2006), ISBN 9781845290702, Robinson.

**Sleeping with Pain** Dr Sue Peacock (2016), ISBN 9780995459922, Ann Jaloba Publishing

**The Sleep Book** Dr Guy Meadows (2014), ISBN 9781409157618, Orion Publishing Co.

### Websites, booklets and audio resources

#### NHS Self help guide

Sleeping problems

[web.nth.nhs.uk/selfhelp/leaflets/Sleeping%20Problems%20A4%202016%20FINAL.pdf](http://web.nth.nhs.uk/selfhelp/leaflets/Sleeping%20Problems%20A4%202016%20FINAL.pdf)

#### Sleepio

An online sleep programme developed by experts in sleep science and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Linked with Colin Espie's book (see above), the website provides access to tools and techniques that are proven to improve sleep.

[www.sleepio.com/cbt-for-insomnia](http://www.sleepio.com/cbt-for-insomnia)

#### The Sleep Council

Provides helpful advice and tips on how to improve sleep quality.

[www.sleepcouncil.org.uk](http://www.sleepcouncil.org.uk)

#### The Sleep School

Offers access to online courses and workshops to help you sleep better. Sessions are delivered by a sleep specialists team led by Dr Guy Meadows.

[thesleepschool.org/insomnia](http://thesleepschool.org/insomnia)

## Pain management resources

### Books

**An Introduction to Living Well with Pain** Frances Cole, (2017), ISBN 9781472137715, Robinson

**Living Beyond your Pain – Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Ease Chronic Pain** J Dahl, (2006), ISBN 978-1572244092, New Harbinger

**The Pain Management Plan** (2010, R. Lewin, ISBN 9780956662804, Npowered

### Websites, booklets and audio resources

#### Living with Chronic Pain

This CD shares ways to manage pain and how to relax your body. It guides relaxation practice. Free download or CD to buy online at £2.

[www.paincd.org.uk](http://www.paincd.org.uk)

#### Pain Management Plan

Practical work book on how people with pain found a better life with pain. The relaxation programme CD guides relaxing the body and mind and so help sleep well!

[www.pain-management-plan.co.uk](http://www.pain-management-plan.co.uk)

#### Mindfulness

Explore the range of resources on mindful practice to enable better living with pain.

[www.breathworksmindfulness.org.uk](http://www.breathworksmindfulness.org.uk)

#### My Live Well with Pain

Tips and help on how to live well with pain

[www.my.livewellwithpain.co.uk](http://www.my.livewellwithpain.co.uk)

#### Ten footsteps to living well with pain

A short leaflet offering key messages and tips for living well with pain.

[my.livewellwithpain.co.uk/resources/ten-footsteps](http://my.livewellwithpain.co.uk/resources/ten-footsteps)