



ACT Palliative Care  
Society Inc.



Calvary  
Health Care  
ACT



Australian Government  
Department of Health and Ageing

The inability to sleep well at night and having periods of wakefulness overnight is known as insomnia. This is a relatively common problem for people who are unwell, and at one time or other, most people in this situation will have difficulty getting to sleep or be troubled by disturbed sleep patterns.

Physical problems may contribute to the disturbance of sleep. Pain, breathlessness, cough, hiccups, dry or sore mouth, or nausea can interrupt sleep and make it difficult for some people to get back to sleep after waking during the night. Talk to the nurse or doctor in your care team if you feel more can be done to make the person you are caring for more comfortable throughout the night.

Daytime inactivity and frequent napping can disturb regular sleep patterns. This can leave a person feeling wide awake at night. A change of daily routine may help undo this. Increasing the amount of daytime activity and reducing the number and duration of daytime naps can sometimes help undo a poor developing sleep cycle. Sometimes it is not possible or appropriate to try these measures. Sometimes a disruption to sleep patterns can be corrected with the aid of sedative medication, given for a short period, to help re-establish normal patterns of sleep. Once normal sleep patterns have been re-established, the sedative can be stopped. Talk to the nurse or doctor in your care team about this option and the things you will need to bear in mind when using sedatives.

Often emotional issues and spiritual concerns lie at the heart of sleep problems. Worries and feelings of sadness can be brought to the fore in the quiet and dark hours of night when a person feels alone and when there are no daytime activities to distract them. Being awake at night often leaves the mind free to run around chasing stray fears and thoughts, and to fret over things that cannot be solved.

These times can sometimes be seen as valuable opportunities to attend to important emotional work - a time of private healing and sorting through issues, fears and worries. Equally, long nights of disturbed sleep can simply be a problem that brings nothing but distress to the person and exhaustion to those who have to care for them through the day as well as through the night.

Strategies to promoting better sleep at night include:

- A small cup of warm, caffeine-free milk-based drink before settling.
- A simple gentle back, foot and/or hand massage.
- A review of medications by the doctor or nurse in your team.
- Establishing a number of patterns or last-minute rituals at the end of the day that can help to focus the mind on getting off to sleep.
- Different relaxation or meditation alternatives particularly those that come as guided relaxation or meditation on a tape or CD.
- Ambient music or soundtracks of nature (such as the gentle sound of waves crashing in the distance or billabong sounds).

## Disclaimer

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**This information should be read in conjunction with the advice provided by your palliative care team.**