

BREAST CANCER AND SLEEP

Sleep is important

Having trouble sleeping can be a common experience shared by many who have breast cancer particularly if you are undergoing treatment. Around one third of all people with cancer experience sleep disturbances. Problems can include difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, waking earlier than usual or feeling tired on waking the following day.

- Sleep is important for maintaining strong physical, emotional and mental health.
- It helps with growth and the repair of cells and helps to strengthen immunity.
- It improves our memory, learning and problem solving.
- It improves productivity and overall quality of life.

The reasons for lack of sleep or poor-quality sleep includes pain or difficulty moving in bed following breast cancer surgery, or the side effects of chemotherapies and medications such as nausea, night sweats or hot flushes. Some medicines also act as stimulants and cause sleeplessness. Cancer treatments can cause fatigue, even if you feel that you are getting a full night's sleep so it's important to rest often. A nap during the day can help to restore your energy levels.

If lack of sleep is affecting your daily life it is important to speak to your doctor to identify the cause and to identify ways to improve rest and sleep. They may recommend medications such as melatonin or a short course of sleeping tablets.

Promoting a calm and restorative sleep

Improving sleep may require a change in health behaviours and environmental factors – this is known as sleep hygiene. Good sleep hygiene is about putting yourself in the best position to sleep well each and every night.

Focus on the three "R's":

- The right environment to aid sleep
- A relaxed body
- A relaxed mind



The right environment

- Create a space that is quiet and relaxing.
- Make your bed as comfortable as possible.
- Change bed sheets regularly.
- Have comfortable sleepwear - absorbent cotton is great if you suffer from night sweats.
- Keep the temperature of the room cool - a fan may help.
- Have your bedroom dark when you are sleeping - blackout curtains can help.
- Try and limit devices such as phones, laptops and TVs in the bedroom. Blue light from devices can inhibit the production of melatonin. Melatonin is a naturally produced hormone which is known to regulate your night and day (sleep and awake) cycles. It is only produced in darkness.
- Consider using soft earplugs.
- Try not to work from the bedroom. Beds should be limited to sleep and sex.

A relaxed body

- It is important to manage pain and other symptoms that might cause distress and interrupt sleep before you settle for the evening. Take pain killers or other medications if needed to ensure you are comfortable before bed. Keep a glass of water and some extra tablets if needed next to your bed to take in the night. This will allow for minimal disturbances if you do wake up.
- Support yourself with pillows:
 - Free heart-shaped pillows can be provided by [BCFNZ nurses](#) and are great to protect tender post-op areas.
 - To support your tummy following breast reconstruction place a couple of pillows under your legs.
- Exercise during the day works well to tire the body. Exercise late in the evening may cause sleep difficulties.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, late meals and spicy foods late in the evening.
- Some people find that a herbal tea or a glass of warm milk helps them to relax.
- Scented oils and creams such as lavender oil may also help you relax.

A relaxed mind

- Practicing meditation or mindfulness may relax your mind and help you sleep.
- Reading or listening to some relaxing music before bed can help you wind down and relax. Some people find that white noise in the background can help promote peace and relaxation.
- It is normal to feel anxious and worried at times during the night. Keep a notebook or pad and pen by your bed. If you wake up in the night with thoughts going around in your head or a list of things to do, writing them down can allow you to clear your mind and relax.
- Speaking with a counsellor can help with processing emotions and worries following a breast cancer diagnosis. BCFNZ provides [free counselling](#) for people diagnosed with breast cancer.



Extra resources

BCFNZ factsheet - Hot flushes

Everything you need to know about treatment-related hot flushes and tips to help you manage them. [View factsheet.](#)

Health Navigator - Sleep resources

Understand common sleep problems and check out the additional resources to support your sleep. [Go to Health Navigator.](#)

Dr Libby - Five ways to improve your sleep

A great place to start when it comes to improving your sleep is by addressing some basic sleep hygiene. [Dr Libby runs through her five top tips.](#)

Sleep Foundation - Sleep hygiene

All you need to know about sleep hygiene, why it's important and how to practice it. [Go to Sleep Foundation.](#)

eviQ - Feeling tired during cancer treatment

Fatigue is common during chemotherapy, radiotherapy and targeted therapies. This factsheet gives you tips to manage fatigue and covers some common questions. [View factsheet.](#)

Insight Timer - Sleep meditation

Guided sleep meditation to help you relax into a deep and restorative sleep. A range of sleep meditations are available for free on Insight Timer. [Sleep meditation.](#)



Reach out for BCFNZ support

Counselling - It's free

Wherever you are in your breast cancer journey, counselling can help. BCFNZ fund three sessions either face to face, over the phone or via Skype. [Complete a self-referral.](#)

Mybc - Our online community

A place to connect and share experiences with others, to ask questions and to get support from a breast nurse. [Join mybc.](#)



For more information

0800 BC NURSE (0800 226 8773)
breastnurse@bcf.org.nz