Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Managing Insomnia

This information explains what insomnia is and how you can manage it.

## About insomnia

Insomnia is having trouble falling or staying asleep, waking up too early, or more than one of these things. It can happen even when you have enough time to sleep. People with insomnia often have trouble going back to sleep after they wake up. Many people with cancer have insomnia.

There are 2 types of insomnia:

- **Acute insomnia** lasts less than 3 months and usually gets better on its own. Sometimes acute insomnia can turn into chronic insomnia.
- **Chronic insomnia** is when you have trouble sleeping for 3 or more nights per week for 3 months or longer.

It’s recommended that adults get about 7 or more hours of sleep a night.

## Causes of insomnia

Insomnia can be caused by many things, such as:

- Anxiety or stress caused by major life events, such as a cancer diagnosis or the death of a loved one. For more information on managing anxiety or stress, read *Managing Anxiety* (www.mskcc.org/pe/anxiety) .
- Changes in your daily routine or environment.
- Unhealthy sleeping habits. This includes watching TV in bed or using your bed for activities other than sleep or sexual activity.
- Some medications.
- Medical problems.

## Signs of insomnia

Insomnia can cause physical symptoms, emotional symptoms, or both. It’s important to recognize the signs of insomnia and ask for help when you need to. Signs of insomnia include:

- Trouble falling asleep.
- Waking up often during the night and having trouble getting back to sleep.
- Waking up too early in the morning.

- Feeling very tired during the day and having low energy.
- Trouble concentrating, which can affect the way you work or study.

If you have any of these signs, talk with your healthcare provider.

## Tips for managing insomnia

Insomnia can affect your mood and your health. This is why it’s important to take care of yourself. If you don’t, you may feel like you’re too stressed or tired to do anything. Here are a few tips that can help:

### Set a regular sleep schedule

Have a regular schedule with a set sleep and wake time. This can help you fall asleep and wake up rested.

### Do light physical activity

Light physical activity can help your body get ready for sleep at night. Get out into the fresh air and sunshine by going for a walk or a short bike ride. Talk with your doctor before starting new exercises.

### Create an ideal sleep environment

Make sure that the room you sleep in is cool, dark, and quiet. Your bed, pillow, and sheets should be

comfortable for you.

If you have pets that are active at night, try not to let them sleep in your bed with you. Take them out of your bedroom or put them on the floor in their own bed. This will help keep them from disturbing you while you sleep.

### Relax and calm down before bed

Avoid bright lights and stimulating activities before bedtime, such as vigorous exercise or stressful tasks for work. Create a calm and relaxing bedtime routine. Taking a hot shower or bath before bed, write in a journal, read, or do gentle stretching exercises or yoga.

### Try relaxation techniques

Relaxation techniques can help you manage your anxiety and improve sleep. Try deep breathing, meditation, and acupressure (putting pressure on parts of your body to help you relax). You can also visit www.msk.org/meditation to listen to free, guided meditations.

### Avoid blue light 2 to 3 hours before bedtime

Blue light is the light that comes from electronic devices, such as your cellphone, tablet, computer, and LED light bulbs. Many devices have a blue light filter that you can set for nighttime. You can also buy a pair of blue light blocking glasses to wear when using an

electronic device.

### Medication

If insomnia is getting in the way of your daily activities, medication may be helpful. There are many medications that can help improve your mood and treat insomnia. For more information, talk with your healthcare provider or call 646-888-0200 to make an appointment with the Counseling Center.

## Treatments for insomnia

No matter how long you've had insomnia, there are treatments that can help. Talk with your healthcare provider about treatments for insomnia. The first step is to tell your healthcare team. They can guide you to the right resources.

### Integrative medicine therapies for insomnia at MSK

MSK offers many integrative medicine therapies to treat or manage insomnia, including:

### Cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I)

CBT-I is a type of talk therapy that helps people change their sleeping habits without using medication.

### Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a form of treatment in traditional Chinese medicine. An acupuncturist will apply very thin needles to certain points on your body. Research shows that acupuncture may help treat insomnia. Read *About Acupuncture* (www.mskcc.org/pe/about_acupuncture) for more information.

Call 646-608-8550 or visit www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/integrative-medicine for more information about other integrative medicine therapies that can help you manage insomnia.

Read *Integrative Medicine Therapies and Your Cancer Treatment* (www.mskcc.org/pe/integrative_therapies) for more information about other therapies that can help manage insomnia.

## MSK Resources

If insomnia is affecting your life in any way, talk with your healthcare provider. You can also contact any of the resources in this section for help. We can help you find the right treatment for you.

## Social Work

212-639-7020

www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/individual-family-counseling/social-work-experts

Our social workers provide emotional support and guidance to patients and their families, friends, and caregivers. Social work offers programs, including both in-person and online support groups. They can also help with practical issues such as transportation to and from medical appointments, temporary housing, and financial concerns. Social workers are available at every MSK location. To talk with a social worker, ask your doctor or nurse, or call 212-639-7020.

## Counseling Center

646-888-0200

www.msk.org/experience/patient-support/counseling

Many people find that counseling helps them manage their emotions during caregiving. MSK's counselors provide counseling for individuals, couples, families, caregivers, and groups. They can also prescribe medications to help with anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems. For more information, ask your doctor or nurse, or call 646-888-0200.

## Integrative Medicine Service

Our Integrative Medicine Service offers many services to complement (go along with) traditional medical care. These include music therapy, mind/body therapies, dance and movement therapy, yoga, and touch therapy. To schedule an appointment for these services, call 646-449-1010.

You can also schedule a consultation with a healthcare provider in the Integrative Medicine Service. They will work with you to come up with a plan for creating a healthy lifestyle and managing side effects. To make an appointment, call 646-608-8550.

### Hours

Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

### Location

Bendheim Integrative Medicine Center
205 East 64th Street (on 64th Street between Second and Third avenues)
New York, NY 10065

## Patient and Caregiver Education

www.mskcc.org/pe
Visit the Patient and Caregiver Education website to

search our virtual library. There, you can find written educational resources, videos, and online programs.

## Virtual Programs

www.msk.org/vp

MSK's Virtual Programs offer online education and support for patients and caregivers, even when you can't come to MSK in person. Through live, interactive sessions, you can learn about your loved one's diagnosis, what to expect during treatment, and how to prepare for the various stages of cancer care. Sessions are confidential, free, and led by expert clinical staff. If you're interested in joining a Virtual Program, visit www.msk.org/vp for more information.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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