

Sleep and Arthritis

ARTHRITIS ACTION FACTSHEETS



Poor sleep is a very common problem for people living with arthritis. Joints often feel stiffer or more painful at night, and pain can wake you up or make it difficult to get to sleep in the first place. Poor sleep can then make you to feel tired, low, or frustrated which makes managing the pain during the day more difficult.

There are lots of things you can try to improve the quality of your sleep.

Create a sleep routine

Try to get up in the morning and go to bed at the same time each day, even at weekends. You may need to set an alarm. Creating a sleep routine will help your body make melatonin which helps control the sleep cycle. Begin building a sleep routine, such as listening to soothing music or doing stretching or relaxation exercises every night before bed. This can remind the body that it is time to slow down and sleep. Taking a warm bath before bed may help you to feel relaxed and sleepy.

Make your bedroom a sleep sanctuary

Try to avoid using your bedroom to watch television or work so that when you do go to bed, your body knows that it is time to sleep. Try to make your bedroom cool, dark and quiet. Sleep quality can be improved by sleeping in a slightly cooler room—around 17C is comfortable for most people, so make sure that you have enough, but not too much bedding. Opening a window at night may help. If you are disturbed by noise at night, consider wearing ear plugs. If you are woken by daylight, try a blackout blind.

Get some “blue light” during the day

“Blue light” has been suggested as a cause of poor sleep in the past, but research on this topic has shown contradictory findings. Blue light is a type of light which is emitted from computers, television screens or mobile phones. In the past, this had been suggested as a cause of poor sleep quality by some scientists. The facts are that much more blue light is emitted by the sun than any electronic device, and for older people who have cataracts (where the lens of the eye becomes cloudy so that no blue light can be transmitted to the back of the eye), sleep disturbance is actually improved when the cloudy lens is replaced and more blue light can be pass into the eye. Blue light during the day, especially in the mornings and after lunch, can be really useful because it can make us feel more alert, and studies have shown that if shift workers who are often sleep deprived get more daylight, their sleep patterns can improve.

Getting more natural rather than artificial light by going outdoors as much as possible during the day can definitely improve sleep quality.

Exercise regularly

Regular exercise, especially aerobic exercise which gets your heart beating faster, has been proven to improve the quality of sleep. Just being more active during the day can also help improve sleep and fight fatigue. In the past it was been suggested that exercising too close to bedtime might affect sleep quality, but this has now been shown not to be the case.

Calm your busy brain

Many people who lie awake at night find that their minds are too active, thinking about worries and things that they need to remember or things that they have to do the following day. Some people also find that worrying about not sleeping then makes the problem worse.

Clearing your mind is not easy at all, but trying to be more relaxed about not sleeping can help. Try to concentrate on feeling calm and comfortable rather than thinking about getting to sleep. If a good idea is keeping you awake, keep a pad and pencil next to your bed and just write down the idea so that you can forget about it until the morning. Try some slow breathing and just concentrate on the action of breathing, perhaps counting your breaths as the air moves in and out, or try some progressive muscle relaxation – tense and relax each part of your body in turn, starting with the toes and working upwards. Visualise a relaxing place such as a wood or beach. Learning meditation or mindfulness and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) may also help to calm your thoughts. If you are still awake after 15 minutes or so, it may be worth getting up and doing a light relaxing task such as having a warm drink, reading, or listening to an audiobook or quiet music, then go back to bed when you feel sleepy again.

Try the “sleep deprivation” technique

Many people who struggle to sleep lie awake in bed for hours and many also nap in the afternoon. The “sleep deprivation” technique has been shown to really work but it takes persistence and willpower.

Work out how many hours of sleep you need and what time you need to get up, then set a bedtime to fit. For example, if you need 8 hours sleep and need to get up at 7, go to bed at 11 and set an alarm for 7am. Under no circumstances sleep beyond 7 even if you have been awake all night and do not have a nap during the day. Set the alarm to go off at 7 every day. If you are sleepless during the

night, then get up and do a relaxing activity and then go back to bed. This technique can take several weeks, but following this plan can really help to reset disrupted sleep.

Avoid stimulants and alcohol

Coffee, tea, cola, cocoa, chocolate, and some medicines contain caffeine and other stimulants which can disturb sleep. The effects of caffeine can last for many hours in the body, so consider switching to decaffeinated drinks or avoid caffeine apart from in the morning. Alcohol may help you feel sleepy at night but overall, it will interfere with the quality of your sleep and prevent you from feeling rested when you wake up.

Avoid eating large meals late at night

A heavy meal before bed or too much spicy food at night can make it difficult to sleep, so consider how much you eat before bed. Herbal tea or a milky drink may help you relax, but don't drink too much before bed as this may mean you have to wake to go to the toilet at night.

Don't nap during the day

If your sleep is disturbed at night then you may feel sleepy during the day, especially in the afternoon. Falling asleep during the day, even for a short nap, can then disturb your sleep at night. If you have to have a short sleep, make sure that you go to bed and set an alarm clock so that you don't sleep for too long – 15 to 20 minutes maximum, and not later than the early afternoon. If you find yourself dozing in the afternoons or evenings, try to get up and do something like going for a short walk or doing something active to make you feel less sleepy.

Check your medicines

Taking medicines for long periods to improve sleep is not a good idea. Lifestyle changes have been shown to be a lot more helpful. Medicines that help us sleep, such as benzodiazepines, can be very useful for severe insomnia for a few days, however these medicines are not useful for long periods because they can be addictive and stop working after a few days. Other medicines such as amitriptyline can be safely used for longer periods because they help to improve sleep quality and interfere with pain pathways.

Some prescription medicines can also affect sleep, such as some antidepressants, painkillers and beta-blockers. If your new tablets seem to be causing a problem then it is worth discussing changing your medication with your GP.

Could it be hormonal?

Many women find that sleep disturbance becomes a real problem at and around the time of the menopause.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) can really help some women. Speak to your GP if this may be relevant to you.

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