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YOUR HEALTH



Sleep tricks for people in pain

BY CHARLOTTE WARD

GETTING to sleep can be challenging at the best of times, but if you're hurting, the frustration is multiplied.

So a new book, *Sleeping With Pain*, could be a lifeline for those who are chronic pain sufferers. Two-thirds of them are estimated to have difficulties drifting off at night.

Consultant health psychologist and author Sue Peacock, an NHS doctor who has spent her career studying pain psychology and therapy, says: "Often the perception of pain actually increases when trying to go to sleep.

"The longer it takes to fall asleep, the more stressful the situation becomes. People with chronic pain often experience less deep sleep and more awakenings during the night.

"Poor or inadequate sleep causes irritability, stress and feelings of being angry, sad, unable to concentrate or mentally exhausted."

Dr Peacock wrote her book after developing a programme to help her exhausted patients get the pain-free sleep they were craving.

Here she shares some essential tips and techniques to help you get a restful night...

Avoid stimulants

Caffeine, nicotine and alcohol all have a stimulating effect on the nervous system, so too much will keep you awake and make it harder to stay asleep even if you manage to drop off.

Try switching to decaffeinated coffee or tea. You may get a caffeine withdrawal headache for the first few days, but your body will gradually accept the change.

If you smoke, cut down during the evening and don't smoke if you wake in the night.

A glass or two of alcohol may help you get to sleep at the beginning of the night, but as the alcohol is absorbed into the body, mild withdrawal symptoms occur. This will either wake you or put you in a

lighter form of sleep. So avoid alcohol four hours before bedtime.

Food for thought

Going to bed too full or too hungry can cause wakefulness. Eating a big meal right before bedtime can make it difficult to drift off as the body's digestion of the food interferes with sleep. In turn, hunger can also cause wakefulness, so a light snack before bed could help to keep you asleep for longer.

Get active, but at the right time

Fit people have a better quality of sleep, but working out right before bed prepares the body for wakefulness. Exercise earlier in the day to aid relaxation and boost your mood.

Drown out the noise

Any kind of noise at night can cause you to stir and move from a deep sleep to a lighter cycle. Assess your home for night-time noise and try to eliminate it, for example by wearing earplugs.

The good sleep rules

- Do not nap in the day more than twice a week as it lessens your need for nocturnal sleep.
- Do not get up or go to bed at irregular times because it prevents your biological clock system from synchronising with the awake system.
- Do not spend extended amounts of time in bed. If awake this causes inappropriate awake conditioning; if asleep it reduces the need for sleep the following night.
- Do not use your bed for non-sleep activities. Sex is allowed but watching TV, reading, studying or snacking all condition you for wakefulness and not sleep.

The heat sweet spot

Being too hot causes restless body movements, more night-time awakenings and less dreaming sleep. If you are too cold, this can also make it hard to sleep and cause unpleasant dreams. The ideal room temperature is around 18C. If the room is stuffy, open the window before bedtime.

Keep it dark

Your bedroom should be almost completely dark when the light is out. If not, get thicker curtains or blinds or place a blanket over your curtains at night. If you need some light, leave the door ajar or use a night light.

Wind down

It is unrealistic to think you can just fall into bed and go straight to sleep. By slowing down your work/activity 60-90 minutes before bed you will help your body become more relaxed. An hour before bed try sitting down with a decaffeinated drink and a light snack, perhaps after a warm bath. You could read or listen to music.

Keep it calm

Try to avoid exciting or emotionally upsetting activities too close to bedtime as they fire up the awake system, can induce muscle tension and prepare the body for action. If your brain is racing, get up, leave the bedroom and try writing down anything on your mind.

Take the painkillers

Some patients report that medications used for pain have a sedative effect but this doesn't necessarily aid good sleep. However, better pain

management means better sleep which means better pain management, leading to even better sleep!

■ **Sleeping with Pain: Strategies For A Restful Night From A Pain Management Expert is on Amazon.**
againinthemind.co.uk

Stop worrying about not sleeping:

- Quick relaxation technique**
- Take a deep breath, sigh out and drop your shoulders.
 - Take two or three deeper, slower out breaths.
 - Carry on more calmly and if possible, a little more slowly.