



How to Manage Sleep Problems

This guide will help you understand:

- Why is sleep important?
- What causes sleep problems?
- What can I do to get better sleep?
- When should I talk to my healthcare team?

This guide is written for people living with kidney disease and those who help care for them. It does not replace advice from your healthcare team (for example, your nephrologist, nurses, social worker, dietitian, pharmacist, psychologist, family doctor or other healthcare providers).

Why is Sleep Important?

Getting good sleep is important because it helps you to:

- Feel rested and less fatigued (tired);
- Cope better with your mood and emotions and reduce stress;
- Boost your immune function (how your body fights off sickness) and avoid injuries; and
- Improve your quality of life.

Most people need 7 to 9 hours of sleep to feel rested. You may need more or less sleep depending on your body's needs, age, and overall health. People typically get less sleep as they age compared to when they were younger.

What Causes Sleep Problems?

Sleep problems can be caused by:

- Health issues common in patients with kidney disease (for example, pain, restless legs, sleep apnea, fatigue, itchy skin, anxiety, and depression);
- Stress of diagnoses and treatments;
- Some medications (for example, antihistamines, antidepressants, pain treatments, antinauseants, water pills, and steroids);
- Not getting enough physical activity or exercise;
- Poor sleep hygiene (for example, consuming caffeine, alcohol, or using devices that give off light before bed).

Do not stop taking your medicines even if you think they may be causing sleep problems. Speak to your healthcare provider about how to take your medications to lessen the impact on your sleep. Sometimes taking the same medications at a different time of day may help.

What Can I Do to Get Better Sleep?

The recommendations below can help you create a plan to get better sleep. Start with small changes that are easy to keep doing. Consider the habits that have worked for you before and fit your lifestyle. It might take a few weeks to notice changes in your sleep. Stay consistent.

Some of the recommendations in this guide may not be possible for people who have kidney disease. Speak with your healthcare provider for ideas to help improve your sleep if these recommendations do not work for you.

WAKING UP

- Wake at the same time each day (regardless of how many hours of sleep you got);
- Within 30-60 minutes of waking, let light in through the windows, turn on the lights, or go out in the sun to set your body clock.

LEAVING YOUR BED DURING THE DAY

- Use your bed for sleep and intimacy/sex only;
- Avoid napping or only have one short nap (no more than 30 minutes) in the afternoon;
- If you need to rest during the day, set up a comfortable chair or sofa to rest in;
- Avoid lying down during the day if you have a tendency to doze off without warning.

EXERCISING

- Aim to move your body for at least 20 minutes a day in whatever way feels comfortable (walking or stretching may be good choices).

EATING AND DRINKING

- Avoid or limit caffeine (coffee, tea, chocolate), alcohol, and smoking starting in the late afternoon;
- Avoid drinking liquids close to bedtime;
- Avoid heavy meals within 2 to 3 hours of bedtime;
- Have a light snack before bed if you feel hungry.

GETTING READY FOR SLEEP

- Blue lights from screens (TV, phone, tablet) can affect your sleep so turn off devices at least 30 minutes before bedtime.
- Spend 90 minutes (1.5 hours) before bedtime in dim light, doing calm and relaxing activities, for example:
 - Reading
 - Meditating or praying
 - Having a warm bath or shower
 - Listening to audiobooks or music
- Go to bed when you feel sleepy at night even if that is before or after your usual bedtime, but keep in mind that going to bed early can throw off your body clock and reduce sleep drive.
- Laying in bed trying to sleep for a long time can cause anxiety and frustration about falling asleep. If you are in bed for 20 to 30 minutes and have trouble falling or getting back to sleep, get up and do something relaxing until you feel sleepier even if it is the middle of the night.
- If worrying keeps you up at night, set aside 20 to 30 min much earlier in the day to get all of your worrying out of the way well before bedtime, writing your worries down and trying to come up with the next step you could take to deal with each problem.
- Consider using ear plugs, eye masks, noise machines or anything else that might help you sleep.

PRACTICE RELAXATION AND MINDFULNESS

Relaxation and mindfulness exercises can help to clear your mind and make it easier to go to sleep.

For example:

- Deep (diaphragmatic) breathing (focusing on your breath while breathing deeply);
- Progressive muscle relaxation (tensing and releasing your muscles to help you relax);
- Guided imagery (imagining yourself in a pleasant, calm place);
- Mindfulness meditation (focusing on the present moment and quieting the mind);
- Journal writing (writing down your thoughts in a paper or journal).

Ask your healthcare team to help you learn more about these exercises.

Other Things That Can Help

OPTIMIZE YOUR BEDROOM

Choose a comfortable mattress, pillows, and bedding that meet your preferences. Consider adjusting your bedroom temperature to be a little cooler at night. Block out light using heavy curtains.

Consider trying light, calming scents (for example, lavender) to help create a calm space for sleep.

KEEP TRACK OF YOUR SLEEP

Use a daily record to track your sleep patterns like what time you wake up and go to sleep and the number of times you wake up at night. Your record can help you talk to your healthcare team about sleep, see patterns in your sleep, and know whether your changes are working.

THERAPY FOR SLEEP

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I) is a type of therapy that helps you change the way you think about sleep and manage the impact of stress and emotions on your sleep. You can do CBT-I yourself or with a professional. You can learn more about CBT-I here: [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia \(CBT-I\): An Overview | Sleep Foundation](#). There is also a mobile application available for CBT-I which is free to use. It was originally developed for veterans but is applicable to anyone. To learn more, visit their website: [CBT-i Coach | VA Mobile](#).

MEDICATIONS

Many people want to know if taking sleeping pills will help their sleep. Sleeping pills should only be used if your healthcare team has recommended them. Sleeping pills are powerful medications that can make you drowsy and confused during the day.

CBT-I is known to work better than sleeping pills. Talk to your healthcare provider before taking any sleep medicines, over-the-counter medicines, or natural supplements.

When Should I Talk to My Healthcare Team?

About 60% of people with kidney disease have trouble sleeping at some point. It is normal to have problems sleeping if it only happens once in a while.

You may have a sleep problem if you experience any of the symptoms below for more than 3 nights a week for a few weeks:

- Having a hard time falling asleep;
- Waking up many times during the night and cannot return to sleep;
- Waking up very early in the morning;
- Feeling tired or sleepy even after a night's sleep;
- Feeling easily upset or unable to do your daily activities;
- Having problems concentrating (focusing) during the day.

If you have any of the symptoms listed above, speak to your healthcare team or your primary healthcare provider.

Where to get more information

For more information on this symptom, or for guides to help manage other symptoms, please visit ontariorenalnetwork.ca/en/kidney-care-resources/clinical-tools/symptom-management/managing-your-symptoms

The recommendations in this guide are based on published evidence and expert consensus.

Ontario Health (Ontario Renal Network) gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the many patients, caregivers and providers that were involved in preparing this Symptom Self-Management Guide. This document is designed to provide people living with kidney disease with information about sleep problems. It is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a qualified health professional, nor is it intended to provide a comprehensive list of treatment options. As treatment options and standards are constantly evolving, we do not guarantee that the information in this document is current. Always speak with your healthcare team if you have questions or concerns.

Ontario Health (Ontario Renal Network) retains all copyright, trademark, and all other rights in the guide, including all text and graphic images. No portion of this resource may be used or reproduced, other than for personal use, or distributed, transmitted or "mirrored" in any form, or by any means, without the prior written permission of Ontario Health (Ontario Renal Network).

Need this information in an accessible format?

1-877-280-8538, TTY 1-800-855-0511, info@ontariohealth.ca

Document disponible en français en contactant info@ontariohealth.ca

Updated August 2024