



Sleep and pain

Your questions answered

When you have a painful musculoskeletal condition (e.g. [arthritis](#), [back pain](#), [polymyalgia rheumatica](#)), getting a good night's sleep can be challenging. But there are things you can do to [manage your pain](#) and sleep better.

Q. Why do we sleep?

A. Just as you need food, water and oxygen, you need sleep.

Sleep helps you to recharge physically and mentally. While you sleep, your body is doing important jobs to ensure you wake up refreshed and healthy. Your brain is cleaning itself of waste products and forming long-term memories. Your muscles, bones, and organs are repairing themselves. Sleep gives you more energy, reduces stress, and strengthens the immune system. It affects your appetite, breathing, hormones, mental health, blood pressure, and cardiovascular health. It also helps you manage your pain better.

That's why getting a good night's sleep is essential.

Q. How much sleep do I need?

The amount of sleep you need varies depending on your age. The average amount of sleep required for most adults is 7-9 hours. However, some people require more sleep, and some need less.

The aim is to ensure you have enough quality sleep to wake up feeling rested and able to do the things you need to do.

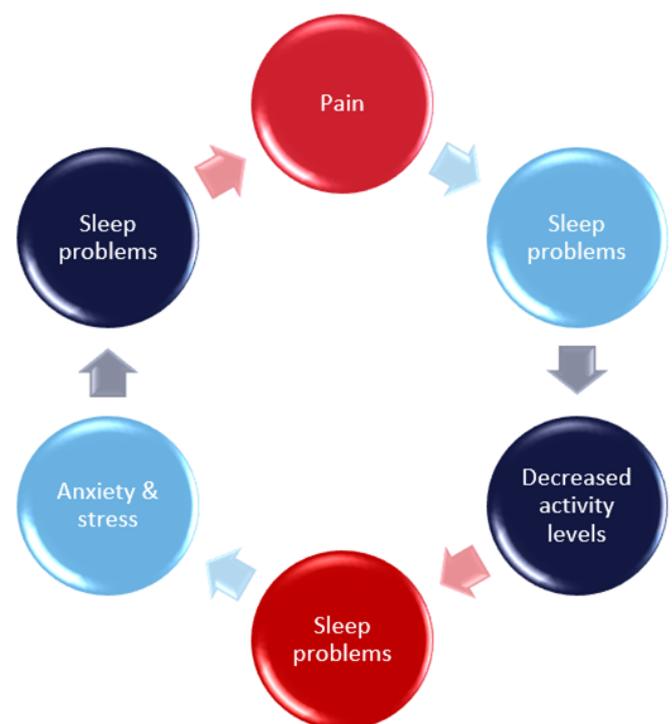
Q. What happens when pain interferes with sleep?

A. Many people who experience pain report problems:

- going to sleep
- staying asleep
- waking too early.

Unfortunately, not getting enough quality sleep lowers your pain threshold. This, in turn, affects the quality of your sleep. Pain can affect your ability to be active - which affects your sleep quality and pain levels. This can make you anxious or stressed – again impacting your sleep quality and the amount of pain you experience.

It can become a vicious cycle.



Q. How can I break the cycle?

A. You can do many things to manage pain symptoms, improve your sleep and break this cycle.

Talk with your doctor about your pain and sleep problems. Is your musculoskeletal condition being adequately managed? Is there something more you can do to ease the pain you're experiencing? Managing your condition and pain levels will help you get a better night's sleep.

Try not to put too much pressure on yourself to fall asleep. This can lead to anxiety and stress if you don't fall asleep quickly. Feeling anxious or stressed can affect your ability to sleep.

Develop a sleep routine. Try to go to bed and get up at the same time each day. For example, go to bed each night at 10.00pm and get up each day at 6.00am. This will help your body clock regulate the production of the hormones needed to go to sleep ([melatonin](#)) or stay awake ([serotonin](#)). When you have a consistent sleep schedule, your body naturally adjusts and begins to feel tired at the right time each day, making it easier to fall asleep.

Get out of bed if you're unable to sleep. Have a warm drink (e.g. milk, herbal tea, no caffeine), do some gentle stretches or [breathing exercises](#) and go back to bed when you feel more comfortable. You may need to do this a few times throughout the night if you have a difficult night, sleep-wise or pain-wise.

Try some relaxation techniques. Consider [mindfulness](#), [visualisation](#) (e.g. counting sheep), [deep breathing](#) or a warm bath before bed. These techniques will help you become more relaxed and manage your pain better so that you can go to sleep and sleep well.

Be active during the day. As well as the many other benefits of [regular exercise](#) (e.g. managing your weight, preventing disease, improving mood, improving bone health), regular exercise helps you fall asleep and stay asleep longer. It's important to be mindful of the time you exercise, however. Some people find that exercising too late in the day affects their ability to fall asleep, as it can raise their heart rate and temperature. Listen to your body and see what works for you.

Eat well. The foods you eat can affect the quality of your sleep. Research shows that eating a healthy, well-balanced diet leads to better quality sleep. In contrast, a diet high in sugar, saturated fats and processed foods leads to poorer sleep. The time you eat is also important. Avoid eating your last main meal of the day too close to bedtime. Allow a few hours for your body to digest your food. If you're hungry before you go to bed, have a small, healthy snack, such as fruit, yoghurt, nuts, or a boiled egg.

Keep a sleep diary. If you're constantly struggling with sleep, start a sleep diary. This will help you and your doctor determine what may be causing your sleep problems because it tracks the things that may impact your sleep. Every day for 1-2 weeks, record things such as:

- when you wake up and when you fall asleep
- how often you wake during the night
- your pain levels
- the things you eat and drink during the day
- your daily activities.

You can keep track in a notebook, or there are many apps you can download and use.

Avoid caffeine, alcohol and spicy foods for several hours before bed. They can affect your ability to fall asleep and the quality of your sleep.

Consider your bedding. Your bedding can greatly impact the quality of your sleep and your comfort. Ask yourself - is my mattress or pillow affecting my sleep? Are they too hard, too soft, or not providing enough support? Is my linen comfortable, clean and keeping me adequately warm or cool (depending on the season)? Then make the necessary changes to address these issues.



Don't look at the clock. Often, when you can't fall asleep or wake up in the middle of the night, you look at the clock and start thinking about how many hours to go until you need to get up. This creates anxiety and makes it hard to sleep. Try removing your clock from the bedside or cover it up at night.

Write it down. Thoughts, worries and anxiety can prevent good sleep. Don't take them to bed with you. Keep a 'worry journal' instead. Choose a time during the day - away from your bedtime - to write down your key worries and consider options for dealing with them. At night in bed, firmly tell yourself that bedtime is not worry time, and you'll revisit your worries the next day with your worry journal.

Light. Is your room dark enough to allow you to sleep well? Or do you have a street light, light from an alarm clock, or light from other rooms making your bedroom too bright for sleep? If this is a problem, look at solutions such as new window coverings, a dim switch on your alarm clock or closing your door. You could also use an eye mask.

Noise. Just as light can interfere with your sleep, so can noise. If you have no control over the noise in your environment (e.g. a barking dog, a loud party, or your partner's snoring), earplugs may be an option. You can buy these at your pharmacy. Some people also find that playing soothing, gentle music softly in the background can help cancel out other more annoying noises.

Don't use technology in bed. It's easy to get caught up and lose track of time reading emails and checking social media on smartphones and tablets. Before you realise it, you're going to bed later than you'd planned. Another problem with using technology close to your bedtime is the blue light from laptops, tablets and phones suppresses the hormone melatonin. Melatonin makes us sleepy at night, so stop screen use at least one hour before bed.

Room temperature. To fall asleep, your body's core temperature must drop a few degrees. So, for your bedroom temperature, it's best to aim for cooler (but not cold) rather than warm. A helpful tip is to think of your bedroom as a cave: it should be cool, quiet, and dark.

Use sleeping tablets sparingly. And talk with your doctor before using any sleep aids you've purchased over the counter.

Q. Where can I get more help?

A. Many people and support organisations can help you manage your musculoskeletal condition. They include:

- your doctor
- Musculoskeletal Australia | msk.org.au | National Arthritis and Back Pain+ Help Line: 1800 263 265

Q. How can Musculoskeletal Australia help?

A. Our nurses are available for you to speak with about arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions, sleep, pain or any other musculoskeletal issues you have. You can contact them on weekdays between 9am-5pm. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au. We also have a range of services – including free webinars – you can access on our [website](http://msk.org.au).



More to explore

- [Bedtime routines – not just for kids](#)
Musculoskeletal Australia
- [Brain basics: Understanding sleep](#)
National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke
- [Getting a good night's sleep](#) - Associate Professor Christopher Worsnop (video)
Musculoskeletal Australia
- [Pain and sleep](#)
Sleep Health Foundation
- [Sleep and pain](#)
Arthritis Foundation
- [Sleep and pain](#)
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- [Sleep Health Foundation](#)
- [Sleep](#)
Versus Arthritis
- [Top tips for good sleep](#)
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