



# Managing insomnia and sleep disorders associated with myeloma and its treatment

## InfoSheet

**Multiple myeloma and novel therapies used to treat this blood cancer may affect various aspects of your health, including sleep quality. Many patients experience insomnia, disrupted sleep patterns, or excessive fatigue. This can be due to the disease itself, treatment related side effects, or related conditions such as pain and anxiety.**

**This InfoSheet will give you more information about sleep disturbances in multiple myeloma, how it can affect your body, and the potential impact on overall wellbeing. We will learn how to recognize signs and symptoms of sleep related issues and explore strategies to best manage this side effect.**

## Definition and causes of insomnia and sleep insufficiency

### What is insomnia?

Insomnia is a common sleep disorder that is characterized by difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or waking up too early and being unable to fall back asleep. It is not solely defined by the numbers of hours slept, as everyone is different, but rather the quality and restorative nature of the sleep. While short term insomnia can be triggered by stress or temporary disruptions, chronic insomnia persists for 3 months or longer. Chronic insomnia may require more targeted interventions.

People with insomnia frequently experience daytime fatigue, impaired concentration, mood disturbances, and a general decline in energy, which can interfere with their ability to perform routine activities. In more severe cases, these impairments may negatively affect both work and personal relationships and decrease alertness, leading to errors and accidents. For many, they can develop an anxiety around their inability to sleep, which can further perpetuate and exacerbate the issue.

### What is sleep insufficiency?

Sleep insufficiency refers to when people are unable to get enough restful sleep.

This is different from insomnia because, in general, people with sleep insufficiency can sleep when they have a chance. Usually there are things in their life outside of their control limiting their ability to sleep (e.g., being a caregiver or having an inconsistent routine).

## Signs and symptoms of insomnia and sleep insufficiency

The symptoms of insomnia can vary from person to person, however, will commonly include the following:

- Trouble falling asleep/remaining asleep
- Fatigue throughout the day
- Forgetting things/issues with concentrating
- Mood disturbances such as becoming agitated, anxious, irritable or depressed
- Loss of interest in doing things
- Making mistakes more often
- Reduced alertness

The symptoms of sleep insufficiency are very similar to insomnia, with the exception that people with sleep insufficiency do not experience issues with falling asleep or staying asleep. People may also experience falling asleep at inappropriate times (e.g., at work or while driving).

## How are insomnia and sleep insufficiency treated?

### Diagnosing insomnia/sleep insufficiency

Your healthcare team will typically not require tests (unless an underlying condition such as sleep apnea is suspected). They will likely ask you to keep a sleep journal over a few weeks including information like: time and duration of sleep, how many times you woke up, alcohol/caffeine consumption, exercise behaviour, and your medication use and schedule.

If you have significant daytime sleepiness, irregular breathing during the night, or disruptive movements while sleeping, your healthcare provider may refer you to a sleep specialist at your hospital or a local sleep clinic.

They might recommend an at-home sleep study, which monitors your breathing, heart rate, oxygen levels, and body position. Alternatively, you may undergo a polysomnogram, which is a more detailed sleep test done in a clinic or hospital that tracks brain waves, eye movements, breathing, blood pressure, and heart activity throughout the night.

### Treatment for insomnia

Treatment depends on the cause, but one of the most effective approaches for chronic insomnia is **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I)**. This involves working with a therapist or counsellor over weeks to months to better understand your insomnia. They will help you recognize and change negative thought patterns about sleep, establish healthier sleep habits, and incorporate relaxation techniques.

In addition, practicing good **sleep hygiene** (more details below), which involves making lifestyle adjustments to improve sleep quality can significantly enhance sleep. Other interventions like exercise, bright white light therapy, medications, and mind-body therapies have been shown to improve cancer-related insomnia in some studies; however, more research is required to better understand who will benefit most from these treatment approaches. For example, while medications may be prescribed in some cases, they are generally considered a last resort due to potential side effects such as daytime drowsiness, dependence, and cognitive impairment. For some people a short course of treatment with a medication may be effective to help reset their sleep cycle.

Certain medications used to treat myeloma and other medical conditions, such as dexamethasone, may contribute to insomnia or difficulty sleeping. Speaking with your pharmacist or medical team for best timing of medications or dose reduction may be beneficial.

If your insomnia is related to stress, pain, or another medical condition, appropriately addressing and treating that problem can help you to sleep better.

### Treatment for sleep insufficiency

The cornerstone of treatment will be to improve your sleep habits and get a better sleep through **sleep hygiene** (more details below). Additionally, working with a counsellor or psychologist can help deal with any issues that may also be impairing your ability to get enough sleep.

## Tips for self-management

There are many things you can try to help prevent insomnia or sleep insufficiency or reduce its severity. The foundation of all self-management is going to be sleep hygiene.

### What is sleep hygiene?

It refers to a set of habits and environmental factors that contribute to high-quality, restful sleep. It encompasses daily routines, dietary choices, and bedroom conditions that influence sleep patterns. Many people unknowingly engage in behaviors that interfere with sleep. Understanding and improving sleep hygiene can make a significant difference in your sleep quality.

### How much sleep do you need?

Sleep needs vary by age and individual health status. The following are general recommendations:

- **Adults (18–64 years):**  
7–9 hours per day
- **Older adults (65+ years):**  
7–8 hours per day

Not getting enough sleep can result in "sleep debt," where accumulated sleep deprivation leads to prolonged fatigue and impaired function. While it is possible to recover from occasional sleep debt, chronic deprivation can have long-term health consequences.

### Why is sleep so important?

- Adequate sleep is essential for cognitive function, physical health, and emotional well-being. It plays a vital role in:
  - **Memory and learning:** Sleep helps the brain process and consolidate information.
  - **Immune function:** Sufficient sleep supports the immune system and reduces the likelihood of illness.
  - **Growth and development:** Children and infants require sleep for proper growth and hormonal regulation.
  - **Tissue repair and muscle recovery:** The body repairs cells and builds muscle during sleep.

## Tips for better sleep: Improving sleep hygiene

Recommendation	Details
<b>Keep a consistent sleep schedule</b>	You want to get up around the same time each day. This helps you to feel sleepy at the same time in the evening. Getting up and going to bed on a schedule can help to improve sleep quality over the long-term. This will help to regulate your body's internal clock.
<b>Avoid naps</b>	Be cautious with naps, short naps (around 20 minutes) can help with alertness but avoiding longer naps or naps later in the day is important as they can interfere with nighttime sleep.
<b>Limit alcohol</b>	Alcohol can interfere with your body's sleep cycle and reduce the quality, so limit intake in the evening.
<b>Limit caffeine</b>	Avoid caffeine in the late afternoon and evening, as it can stay in the system for hours. Keep in mind that drinks like pop, cola, kombucha, workout supplements, tea and coffee can be high in caffeine.
<b>Avoid nicotine</b>	Nicotine is a stimulant and should be avoided in the evenings. This includes vaping, Zonnec or other products that contain nicotine, cigarettes and cigars.
<b>Exercise</b>	Regular physical activity improves sleep quality but intense physical activity before bed can have the opposite effect. The best time to exercise for sleep benefits is 4-6 hours before your scheduled bedtime.
<b>Keep your room/sleep area quiet and dark</b>	Keep your sleep area cool, dark and quiet. You can use blackout curtains, sound machines and eye masks.
<b>Stay away from bedroom clocks</b>	Watching the time at night can increase stress and make falling asleep more difficult. Consider moving any clocks from your direct view.
<b>Limit evening eating</b>	Heavy meals before bedtime can lead to discomfort and disrupt sleep. If you need to have a snack to avoid going to bed hungry, opt for a smaller, high in protein snack to prevent hunger from waking you up.
<b>Create a relaxing bedtime routine</b>	Establish a pre-sleep ritual like reading a book, meditating or taking a warm bath. You want to avoid stimulating activities, such as watching intense TV or having stressful interactions before bed.
<b>Limit screen time before bed</b>	Blue light is emitted by our phones, tablets, computers and other devices make it harder to fall asleep. Avoid using these devices before bed.
<b>Address stress and worries before bed</b>	Try to journal, practice breathing exercises or engage in relaxation techniques before bed to clear your mind. If anxiety is ongoing, please reach out to your healthcare team.

## Tips for better sleep: Improving sleep hygiene (following)

Recommendation	Details
<b>Go to bed when tired</b>	Only go to bed when you feel sleepy. If you're still awake after about 20 minutes, get up and do something calming and enjoyable in low lighting. Head back to bed once you feel sleepy again.
<b>Use your bed for sleep and intimacy only</b>	To strengthen the link between your bed and sleep, use it only for sleep and sex. Avoid lying in bed when you're not sleepy, as trying too hard to fall asleep can lead to frustration and wakefulness causing your brain to associate the bed with being awake rather than restful.

### When to seek immediate medical attention?

Contact your healthcare team if you experience any of the following red flags for insomnia/sleep insufficiency:

- For those experiencing distressing thoughts related to sleep deprivation, reaching out to a trusted medical professional or crisis support service is essential:

- **Contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** to speak to someone, call or text **988**.

- **Contact 911** for immediate assistance if you or someone you know is in danger or experiencing a medical emergency.

- Go to your nearest emergency department.

Sleep is essential for both physical and mental health. While both insomnia and sleep insufficiency can be challenging, prioritizing sleep hygiene can significantly improve sleep quality. By making small but consistent changes, you can enhance your overall wellbeing by improving sleep quality.

To learn more about fatigue, consult Myeloma Canada's "**Managing Pain and Fatigue**" InfoGuide in the Resource library at [www.myeloma.ca](http://www.myeloma.ca). For specialist medical support for cancer-related fatigue, consider contacting Cancer Fatigue Services at [www.cancerfatigueservices.com](http://www.cancerfatigueservices.com). Your healthcare team, pharmacist, and nutritionist are also there to support you. It's important to share your symptoms with them.

### References :

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Nissen ER, et al. Interventions for insomnia in cancer patients and survivors: a comprehensive systematic review and meta-analysis. *JNCI Cancer Spectrum*. 2024; 8(3).

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