



SLEEP AND ARTHRITIS

It is very common for people with arthritis to have pain at night and trouble sleeping. Getting to sleep and staying asleep are the main problems. Research shows that pain and sleep have a two-way relationship: pain disturbs sleep, and trouble sleeping makes pain and disability worse during the day. We don't know how this relationship works yet. We do know that pain and trouble sleeping impact our bodies, our behaviour, and our quality of life. They also affect our mood and may also make us feel depressed. Research shows that treatment works best if we focus not just on pain but sleep too, so let's look at tips for getting a better night's sleep.

Setting up your sleep environment

- Make your bedroom a quiet, dark space with comforting touches that invite you to sleep.
- Use your bedroom as a space only for sleep and intimacy so you make that connection in your mind.
- Keep the room a bit cooler and add more bedding for warmth if you need it.
- Check your mattress is comfortable. Does it need turning or replacing? Adding a soft, thick overlay can be helpful. If you buy a mattress, check if there is an at-home trial period so you can swap or return for a full refund. A soft mattress is best for most people, and memory foam is recommended.
- An adjustable electric bed or La-Z-Boy recliner chair may be helpful (check with WINZ to see if you are eligible for funded equipment).
- Keep lights dim and use amber, red, yellow, or orange lighting.
- Try an aromatherapy diffuser and essential oils, such as lavender, to set the mood.
- Have a journal by your bed so you can write down any worries and mentally let them go – telling yourself you will leave them for the morning.

Predictable flares

- Set yourself a sleep routine – going to bed and getting up at about the same time every day.
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine, and other drugs in the evening. Alcohol can make you feel sleepy, but when it wears off a few hours later you wake up.
- Avoid exercise in the evening as this can wake your body up.
- Make activities in the hour and a half before bed relaxing, such as colouring in or listening to gentle music.
- Avoid looking at phone or computer screens before bed as blue light stops your body making your natural sleep hormone melatonin.
- Massage in warming or anti-inflammatory creams such as Deep Heat, Zostrix, or Voltaren Emulgel.
- Have a warm shower to relax muscle tension.
- Try gentle stretching before bed.
- Pop a heated-up wheat-bag in bed for sore joints.

Body support

Getting the right cushioning support is important. Think about which joints are sore and what your usual sleeping position is – this will help guide you as you experiment to find the right cushioning.

Neck

A thinner head pillow may help keep your spine aligned if you are a back sleeper, while side sleepers may need a thicker pillow. Another cushion under your lower back may also help.



Shoulders

Side sleepers may find a thicker head pillow reduces pressure on your shoulders. Sleep on your less sore side and pop a pillow under your top arm to stop your shoulder falling forward.

Arms, Wrists, and Hands

Place a cushion under your arms. This is also helpful if shoulder problems cause pain or numbness in your arms or hands. Use compression gloves during the night to improve blood flow and reduce stiffness. Wear a hand-splint if you have one (see a hand therapist to make sure it's right for you).

Knees

Back sleepers can put support under your knees. For side sleepers a curved knee pillow helps to stack and support your knees.

Hips

Use a pillow or cushion under or between your knees to reduce pressure on your hips. Extra support behind your lower back may also help.

Feet

Compression socks can be helpful to improve blood flow and reduce swelling. Gout Arthritis can mean even a sheet is too painful on the feet – a bed cradle can be fitted over the mattress to lift sheets and blankets above sore joints. You can easily make one out of an upside-down cardboard box with holes cut in the side.



When to contact a health professional

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) helps to replace fearful thoughts with more helpful thought patterns. A counsellor or psychologist can help you learn new ways to deal with negative thoughts and catastrophising which often occur when we are in pain. Changing your thought patterns can reduce muscle tension and pain, helping with sleep.

Slow diaphragmatic breathing helps reduce the heart rate and tells your body you are safe and can relax. Gentle music and guided visualisation or sleep meditations can help move your mind away from worrying thoughts and painful joints. Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is a strategy where you mentally move through your body from head to toe, tensing and relaxing each muscle group as you go.

Exercising

Getting some exercise every day will help your body feel tired and ready to rest.

Medication

- Check with your pharmacist that medications you take are not interfering with sleep.
- Herbal sleep supplements may be helpful but check with your doctor or pharmacist first to make sure these will not interact with your medications.
- Artificial melatonin is useful for some people. Talk to your GP or nurse practitioner if you would like to try this.
- Sleeping pills may be an option if you are struggling. In most cases this is a short-term measure as they can be addictive, and you may lose confidence to fall asleep without them.

Sleep conditions

Resolving a sleep condition is important as they can cause physical health problems. Snoring, Obstructive Sleep Apnoea and Restless Legs Syndrome are common examples. Signs include difficulty staying awake during the day, waking often during the night, and snoring. See your doctor if you think this could be you.

This Arthritis NZ Fact Sheet was clinically reviewed by Dr Emma Dunning, Healthify He Puna Waiora (formerly Health Navigator NZ), 2023.

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