

Chapter 8: Keeping Straight Through the Night

Consider sleeping as eight hours of therapy a day. Not only does this provide your body with much needed rest, it also can help enhance good posture. Check your posture regularly. If you have no symptoms or posture problems, you need not make changes in the way you sleep. If you are uncomfortable, there are options to consider. We will look more closely at your choices for mattresses and pillows, review positioning, and see how medications can all serve to make these eight hours worthwhile.

Mattresses

Although you cannot completely control your posture while sleeping, you can get started in a straight position on a firm mattress with no pillow under your knees or head. Since pain may seem more severe at night, you need a good foundation to decrease discomfort. Your mattress should be firm and definitely not sag, but can be covered with a variety of relatively thin pads, which cushion the mattress, distribute pressure evenly, and are still comfortable.

“Egg crate” or “Waffle” mattress pads made of foam can be found in most hospital supply stores and department stores. They tend to be warm, as are most foams, and are somewhat difficult to move around on. You can also purchase high-quality 1-1/2-inch thick foam, cut to measure for your bed, from local craft stores. Foam tends to “bottom out” over time and may need replacement long before your mattress has worn down.

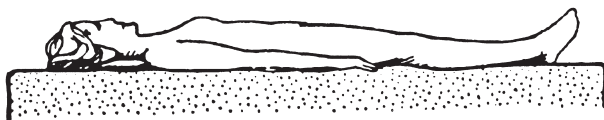


Figure 1a: If your neck is painful when you're on your back, a small pillow folded just under the head, can give support without pushing your head forward into a poor posture position.

The benefits of waterbeds are questionable. Even if they are tightly filled, they probably do not provide sufficient support at the crucial areas (they sag where we bulge) and they may be difficult to get out of and to maintain. On the other hand, they can keep you warm and provide a degree of comfort.

If your back is rigid or you are in spasm, side rails on the bed can help you pull over to the side of the bed or to get up. These are available at medical supply stores. A “Posey” ladder is made of canvas rungs and attaches to the foot of the bed to provide you a means of pulling yourself up.

Pillows

Usually, there is very little distance between the back of the neck and the bed. That is the space that a pillow should take up when you are lying on your back. When on your side, a pillow should only take up the distance between your ear and the mattress (see figure 1a and 1b). When you have problems with neck stiffness or pain, there is a risk of bending the neck forward into a position that puts strain on the neck, shoulder muscles, and the spine that we are striving to keep straight. Even if you have no neck discomfort, thick pillows put a strain on your neck muscles. On the other hand, if your head and neck have fused permanently in a forward position, you need to use enough pillows for support.



Figure 1b: When lying on your side, place a pillow under your ear to keep your head level with your body and to prevent neck strain.

You can make a supportive and protective pillow by tying a sash around the middle of your pillow. The sides are now thickened for side lying head support and the middle is almost flat for support under the neck when lying on your back. You can find a variety of “cervical” (neck) pillows at medical supply stores and department stores. Try various pillows to find the one that’s best for you.

No matter how comfortable you are, reading in bed is out of the question if it means you have to bend forward to hold and see the book. Many types of bookrests are available that will position the book so that you can read comfortably without compromising your posture.

Positioning

Sleep in a position that gives you the best possible posture while still allowing a good night’s sleep. Lying on your stomach or back is best. A side sleeping position is acceptable, but not as effective in maintaining an erect posture because you flex forward at the hips and knees and are curled in your back and neck. A “half body twist” may work, where you lie on your stomach and only flex one knee and hip. The arms can be folded under the forehead, which is facing down, or one arm can bend at the shoulder and elbow with head turned to the same side (See figure 2).



Figure 2: Modified position if unable to stay comfortably on your stomach. For comfort, you may use pillows under your bent knee and arm.

Medications

Spondylitis pain often disturbs sleep. The first issue, then, is to be sure that you are taking your medications regularly, in the proper dosages and as prescribed by your doctor. Sometimes an adjustment in medication is helpful. Refer to Chapter 3, “Medications for Spondylitis and Related Conditions.”

If pain continues to interfere with sleep or if you have developed a sleep disorder, other medications may be prescribed. Some “disorders” include difficulty getting to sleep or frequent awakening with an inability to return to sleep. Sometimes medications taken for other reasons, including colds, diet or headaches, interfere with sleep. Occasionally, symptoms can be relieved by learning and applying new patterns of behavior.

Sleep Behaviors

The physical, chemical, hormonal and muscular stages your body goes through as you drift off to sleep are very individualized. When your pattern is disrupted by pain, stress, anxiety or dietary factors, it’s harder for you to feel rested. It may help to review the following factors with your doctor or health professional to tailor these suggestions to your needs.

Dietary Considerations

- Avoid stimulants like caffeine, found in coffee, soda or chocolate. Nicotine is also a stimulant.
- Eat a light snack before bedtime. It’s not wise to go to bed hungry, nor should you feel too full.
- Avoid highly acidic or spicy foods at night, such as tomatoes and citrus fruits.
- A good diet, low in fat and high in protein, improves general health, which promotes good sleep.
- Lack of sufficient water intake can also lead to dehydration, fatigue, headaches and disturbed sleep.

Conditioning for Sleep

- Maintain a regular daily schedule of activities.
- Exercise, but not in the late evening.
- Set aside a time in the evening for relaxation about an hour before bedtime.
- Make your bedroom as quiet and as comfortable as possible. Wear earplugs if necessary.
- Use your bedroom only for sleeping or being intimate with your partner.
- Go to bed and arise at the same time every day, even on weekends and holidays.
- Avoid long naps. Short naps may be necessary to get through the day. If you take one, go to bed later than you would have otherwise.
- Use a clock radio with an automatic shut-off to play soft music at bedtime. If you are not a heavy sleeper, wake up to music rather than to a clanging alarm. Use headphones if music disturbs your partner.

What About Sex?

Sex may not seem appealing if you are fatigued or are feeling pain or limitation. However, not only can you still enjoy sex, but you may find it therapeutic, as well. Sex actually has a beneficial effect on relieving stress, releases endorphins that help to decrease pain, and fosters closeness and a feeling of well-being. Learning how to maintain your sensuality and sexuality, whatever that means to you, will reduce stress, thereby relieving pain.

To be most enjoyable, it helps to be rested, relaxed, relieved of muscle stiffness, and able to honestly communicate to your partner both what feels good and what could be changed in some way.

Taking a hot shower can help you to relax and provide an opportunity for you to stretch your muscles and loosen up. Plan your day so that you have energy left when you want to use some for sexual activity.

Be creative in establishing a romantic atmosphere. Devise positions that will accommodate any pain or limitation you may have. Standing, lying sideways, kneeling or lying on your back are just a few of the many positions available to you. If you are hurting, you may want to add support for your back, with pillows under your knees, small low back cushioning such as a small rolled towel, and go for romance or other sexual techniques rather than intercourse. Gentle environment, gentle attitude and gentle touching are key.

