

Consumer Handout | Canberra Health Services

Coping with sleep problems after road trauma

After a road accident, you may have trouble sleeping. This can happen if you were in the crash, saw it happen or lost someone in the accident. This factsheet gives you simple tips to help you sleep better.

Tips to help you sleep

Before going to bed

- Avoid drinking alcohol as it causes you to sleep lightly and wake more frequently.
- Avoid smoking 2 hours before bed. Smoking keeps your brain awake by stimulating your nervous system.
- Avoid eating a big meal before bed. It can upset your stomach and sleep quality.
- Do something relaxing; drink a caffeine-free tea, read a book, do mindful colouring or take a warm bath.
- Turn off the TV, computer and electronic devices 30 minutes before bed.
- Breathe slowly or do gentle stretches. A breathing exercise is to feel your breath entering your lungs and imagine what that might look like.
- Write down thoughts that occupy your mind or make your to-do list for tomorrow.
- Go to bed when you feel tired and try to go to sleep at the same time every night to set your body clock.
- Sleep comes in waves. Go to bed when your body feels ready to sleep.

At sleep time

- Only use your bed for sleeping and intimacy, not for TV, electronic devices or eating.
- Make your bedroom is dark, quiet and not too warm. Eye masks are helpful for blocking out light and earplugs may help reduce noise.
- If you wake up during the night, avoid turning on a bright light as this may trick your brain into thinking it is morning.
- If you cannot sleep after 20 minutes, get out of bed and do something boring in low light until you feel sleepy.
- Try not to look at the time if you can't sleep. Sleep quality is more important than the number of hours you sleep.

During the day

- Avoid caffeinated drinks and foods such as tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks or chocolate 4-6 hours before bed.

- Do some gentle exercise every day.
- Avoid naps during the day, as this can disrupt your sleep cycle. If you need a rest, make it short, no more than 20 minutes and before 3pm.
- If worries keep you awake, write them down. List the problems you might be worrying about during the night and take active steps to solve the ones you can.
- Try calming activities like: deep breathing, muscle relaxation, meditation, massage, imagine peaceful places.
- Engage in relaxation techniques such as progressive muscular relaxation, massage, visualisation, or meditation.

Nightmares (bad dreams)

After a road accident, you might have bad or scary dreams. This may happen right after experiencing or witnessing a road accident or it may begin weeks later.

You may wake up to a distressing nightmare, feeling terrified, scared or upset. These dreams happen because your brain is trying to make sense of the accident. Trauma disrupts this normal process.

If you find nightmares continue to be a problem after 3 to 4 weeks after the road accident, talk to your doctor or counsellor. You can try some of the following tips:

- Prepare your bedroom for when you wake distressed. Keep a soft light on at night so you know where you are if you wake.
- Keep a comfort item near you, like a soft toy or a photograph.
- Plan what to do when you wake up upset:
 - sit up
 - go to the bathroom
 - splash cold water on your face
 - tell yourself something calming.
- Tell a trusted person you live with, so they can help you feel safe.
- During the day, try to think about your nightmare:
 - think of a new, safer ending.
 - write it down or draw it.
 - read or look at it often.
- Talk about your nightmares with people you trust. This can take away some of the fear.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. You are not 'crazy'. This is a normal reaction.

Where to get help

If you continue to have difficulties sleeping, organise a health check with your General Practitioner (GP) who can give you advice on how to proceed including seeing a counsellor or psychologist. You may be able to see a counsellor through your Third-Party insurer.



Support services

- ACT Trauma Service, phone (02) 5124 3293 or email ACTTraumaService@act.gov.au
- The Canberra Hospital Social Work Department, phone (02) 5124 2316 or email acthealthtchsocialwork@act.gov.au
- Grief Australia, website www.grief.org.au or phone 1800 642 066
- Reach Out, website www.au.reachout.com
- Lifeline, phone 13 11 14 or website www.lifeline.org.au

For more information scan the QR code or go to:

<https://www.canberrahealthservices.act.gov.au/resources/health-information-sheets-search?collection=actssict%7Esp-information-sheet-finder&query=&f.Categories%7Ccategories=Emergency+and+trauma>



Road Trauma Support WA, Injury Matters 2024, adapted by Canberra Health Services with permission



Acknowledgement of Country

Canberra Health Services acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of the ACT and recognises any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and contribution to the life of this region.



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