When pain stifles your sleep

Wide awake again? Have you been tossing and turning? Maybe you can’t fall asleep or you wake up in the middle of the night and can’t go back to sleep? While you’re certainly not alone if you suffer from symptoms of insomnia, if you have a chronic pain condition, your insomnia may be a nightly issue rather than a transient irritation. According to sleep experts, two out of three people with chronic pain conditions have trouble sleeping.

One underlying cause for insomnia is pain. Whether it’s a sore lower back or throbbing toothache, pain is difficult enough to cope with during the day, but pain at night robs you of sleep and can be exhausting. Bedtime should allow the distractions of the day to drop away. It should be a time to relax and unwind, but for a person living with chronic pain, it is unavoidable time alone with the pain that may have been masked during the day. At night, the pain is amplified because it’s the only activity felt by the brain. This generally makes falling asleep fraught with difficulty. Chronic pain often results in chronic sleep disturbance (chronic insomnia), which lasts for longer than three weeks and can seriously affect your daily functioning. Disturbance in sleep leads to mood changes, difficulty concentrating and decreased productivity. The problem becomes even more complicated because commonly prescribed pain medications can interrupt sleep.

An individual in pain simply cannot get comfortable enough to fall asleep, but the pain also results in difficulty staying asleep. And once pain keeps you awake one night, it is likely to do the same thing again and again. “Pain-related insomnia gets worse over time,” says sleep expert, Dr Alison Bentley. Many types of pain can interrupt sleep, from the chronic pain of arthritis to the acute pain that follows surgery. The major causes of sleep loss due to pain are back pain, headaches, facial pain caused by temporomandibular joint (TMJ) syndrome, musculoskeletal pain, which includes arthritis and fibromyalgia, as well as premenstrual cramping. Pain from cancer, the disease itself and its treatment, is also a major offender in causing poor sleep. Waking up throughout the night, having difficulty falling asleep, awakening too early in the morning and generally experiencing non-refreshing sleep are all common in chronic pain sufferers.

Ultimately, all of this creates a vicious cycle. Pain triggers poor sleep. Someone experiencing lower back pain, for example, may experience several micro-arousals every hour of the night – changes to a lighter stage of sleep, which leads to awakenings. While not noticed in the pain-free person, even the slightest change of environment during sleep can wake up a person in pain. Pain is a serious interruption to sleep and is frequently associated with insomnia. One problem can aggravate the other and can be hard to treat. “When a chronic pain sufferer experiences fragmented sleep, a vicious cycle ensues,” says Dr Bentley. “Sleep disruption caused by chronic pain exaggerates the pain, which in turn also interrupts sleep. This can become a pattern that is hard to break.”

Dr Bentley explains how it works – we all need a certain amount of each stage of sleep to feel rested. This is our light sleep, deep sleep and REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. While we usually go through four to six cycles of these stages per night, pain means that we are constantly woken up and therefore spend too much time in light sleep. To add to the problem, shortened REM sleep may actually increase our sensitivity to pain. Some pain, like orthopaedic or arthritis pain, stops us getting comfortable – when we move, it hurts and we wake up. Research has shown that pain after surgery and other pain affects both the length and quality of sleep. In people with fibromyalgia, a chronic condition that causes joint and muscle pain, there are constant bursts of ‘awake’ brain activity, which prevents deep sleep so people with the conditions wake up more often during the night. “Pain is a sensation you feel when nerves are intensely stimulated. This stimulation activates the brain, which keeps you awake,” says Dr Bentley.

The first step to managing your sleep disturbance is to reduce the pain. Pain control not only makes sleeping easier, but also reduces anxiety and depression. Always tell your doctor about the sleep problems you’re having as a result of your pain – a change in medication may be needed. It is time to seek professional help when pain causes sleep problems two to three times a night, and you are unable to fall asleep again. There are a variety of treatments available to ease the sleep problems of chronic pain sufferers, including medication and physical therapy. There are also a number of sleep labs and sleep clinics countrywide, which offer diagnostic sleep studies.

While sleep is one of the keys to physical and emotional wellness, chronic pain can grind down emotions and whittle away our sleep, leaving us feeling raw and frustrated. But living with a chronic pain condition, doesn’t always mean living with sleep deprivation.

Call SADAG’s Sanofi Aventis Sleep Disorders Helpline on 0800 SLEEPY/753 379 and get ready for some down time.

SOME TIPS FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH CHRONIC PAIN

- Stop caffeine consumption.
- Limit alcohol intake, with no alcohol in the evenings.
- Avoid vigorous exercise. However, light exercise in the afternoon can be helpful.
- Take a brief nap in the afternoon, no more that 10 to 20 minutes.
- Painkillers and/or sleeping pills can be effective, but should be used under the supervision of a physician.
- Practice relaxation techniques, such as deep abdominal breathing.