



Minimizing Sleepless Nights

Pamela A. Cazzolli, RN

www.alscareproject.org

Trouble going to sleep or awakening periodically during the night is a common problem in people with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Difficulty in changing position, aching muscles, discomfort from immobility and stiff joints and breathing problems often prevent people from falling asleep or staying asleep. Some people have excessive oral secretions and difficulty clearing the throat because of a weak cough.

Consequently, a nightly pattern of sleeplessness may result in excessive daytime fatigue, irritability, ineffective coping, frequent episodes of impatience or crying, increased trouble breathing and a miserable life.

Alleviating sleep disturbance begins with identifying the cause of wakefulness. If you have bodily pain, determine why and what to do about it. Remaining in the same position too long may contribute to considerable discomfort. Repositioning the body every two hours promotes optimal comfort and the ability to sleep. Some people obtain relief from immobility by arising in the middle of the night and sitting in a chair for a short while. Identify ways to change

positions as easily as possible. Use of a draw sheet can help caregivers turn their loved ones on their sides while in bed.

People who are dependent on others for care need to communicate to their caregivers their most comfortable positions for sleeping. Display of photographs of the patient in their preferred positions for sleeping provides a visual aid for hired caregivers on exactly how to position their patients as they desire.

An electric bed offers a variety of comfortable positions. The head and foot of the bed can be easily elevated or lowered with a push of a button. Side rails aid in turning for those who can grab bars. Some people hold onto the arm-rest or back of a heavy chair next to the bed to help them move. Silky bedclothes or satin sheets aid in sliding over.

To maximize comfort, try using foam overlay mattresses that are three to four inches in thickness to provide pressure relief. One thick foam overlay that is segmented for body support and distributes pressure evenly is the Geo-Matt® (Span America, Greenville, SC). An air mattress (called an alternating pressure pad) can provide comfort and reduce skin breakdown by minimizing pressure on the body when lying in one position for a long time. The use of pillows

applied to any part of the body provides further support and comfort. A neck or cervical pillow may help ease neck pain.

Because joint stiffness is common in people with limited mobility, stretching or range-of-motion exercises before retiring may help prevent or minimize joint pain during the night. Stretching exercises may also help alleviate muscle cramping. People with weak extremities, however, need careful handling. Pulling on limbs too forcefully can dislocate joints. Unresolved pain warrants an evaluation by a physician who may recommend physical therapy for unmanaged pain.

Wakefulness at night may also be a sign of respiratory muscle impairment, causing hypoventilation or a reduced rate and depth of breathing. Since a weak diaphragm muscle decreases the ability to inhale fully, it may be difficult to breathe while lying flat. Elevation of the head and upper body may possibly relieve pressure on the diaphragm and promote lung expansion when sleeping.

Sometimes it is more comfortable to sleep in an upright position. People who have disrupted sleep should see a pulmonary physician for evaluation of their respiratory status and discuss the options for treatment. Successful use of

nasal ventilation (use of a small portable machine that administers positive pressure air through the nose via a nasal mask) alleviates respiratory symptoms and maintains breathing, despite respiratory insufficiency. Use of nasal ventilation also minimizes the fear of going to sleep.

People with impaired swallowing reflexes may wake up periodically in the night choking on saliva or excessive oral secretions. This can be annoying, especially for those with a weak cough and who are unable to clear their airways. Sleeping with the head elevated or lying on one side may reduce the amount of secretions moving to the cough reflex center. Some people may benefit from the use of a suction pump or a cough machine, such as the Emerson Cough-Assist (J. H. Emerson Co., Cambridge, MA) to clear secretions from the airway.

In addition, some individuals obtain relief from effective manual assisted coughing techniques. The proper techniques for clearing the airway can be taught by a registered nurse or respiratory care practitioner, as ordered by the physician. A little sip of

carbonated beverage may help break up thick mucus and clear the throat.

Before going to bed: avoid conflict, violent TV programs, overexertion, beverages with caffeine (caffeine's stimulative effect peaks three to four hours after ingestion), smoking, and heavy meals. A full stomach may put pressure on the diaphragm, the principle muscle for drawing air into the lungs, and thus, impair breathing. A little milk, Ovaltine, or custard, however, may induce drowsiness.

Some ways to promote relaxation include: a slow, rhythmic back rub or a light massage of the limbs to soothe aching muscles and help reduce stress; listening to favorite soft music; praying, pleasant conversation; expressing love and kindness to your mate; and sharing your feelings. Never go to bed with unresolved conflict.

The bedroom should be conducive to sleep: Cool, dark and free from extraneous noise and distractions. A light covering such as a flannel sheet is ideal for those who perspire easily or who have intolerance to heat. Use of a fan circulates room air and helps some people

to breathe more comfortably. People with fears of dying should not be left alone and always have a method to signal for help. Use of wireless monitor or intercom system provides a means for family caregivers to hear their loved ones if they leave the room. Also, use of a nightlight may help minimize feelings of abandonment. Following a routine of retiring the same time each evening and reducing daytime napping help promote sleeping through the night. Excessive daytime drowsiness, however, may be a sign of respiratory disturbance, warranting a pulmonary evaluation.

Despite employing various methods to induce sleep, some people continue to wake up frequently, necessitating the attention by family caregivers throughout the night. Perhaps hiring someone to provide care during the night may allow family members to get the adequate rest they need as well. A good night's sleep is essential for everyone to feel their best the next day and to maintain strength to carry on with the challenges of life. Living in harmony everyday, however, is a vital key for sleeping soundly at night.

© 2000 Pamela A. Cazzolli, RN, Canton, Ohio USA. All Rights Reserved.
www.alscareproject.org PCazzolliRN@aol.com
Toll Free: 866-TEAM-ALS

ALS Care Project, 4450 Belden Village St NW, Suite 202, Canton OH 44718 USA

"Improving the care of people with ALS through research and education in the community"