

Sleeping Smart

By Nancy M. Lowe, MPT, CHT, CAE

Do you ever wake up feeling like a truck ran over you during the night? Do you toss and turn and have a hard time getting comfortable? Sleeping should feel relaxing and rejuvenating; not like a battle.

If you aren't comfortable at night, you might benefit from a different mattress, a mattress topper, or adjustment in your sleeping positions.

The old advice on mattresses was "the firmer the better". But we've since learned that a super firm mattress doesn't always provide the needed support for our body's contours. Conversely, a too-soft mattress may fail to maintain proper spinal alignment. Though choices can be confusing, we are fortunate that there are now mattresses and pillow tops (also known as overlays or toppers) that can provide adequate softness or firmness, as well as ventilation and resiliency to satisfy a host of needs.

If you feel a gap between your waist and the mattress, if your waist sinks down to reach the mattress, or you experience uncomfortable pressure points, you may need a softer mattress or pillow top. If your body caves in as if it were in a hammock, you probably need a firmer mattress.

If you easily feel hot or sweaty at night you may benefit from breathability, such as that afforded by egg crate and pellet toppers or a wool mattress pad. Those of you with pressure points may feel better lying on smooth memory foam.

Another strategy that can aid sleeping comfort is adjusting your sleeping position. Simply placing a pillow between your knees and ankles while on your side can help prevent unwanted twisting and sagging of the spine. Supporting the "uphill" arm with an additional pillow can improve shoulder, arm and upper back comfort.



Placing a pillow between your knees and ankles while sleeping on your side can help prevent unwanted twisting and bending of the pelvis and spine.

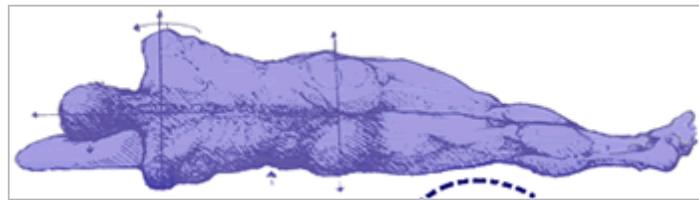
Make sure that the pillow under your head supports your neck in a neutral position to prevent your waking up with a stiff neck. If you have a flat upper back you may need a smaller pillow or just a small towel roll under your neck when lying on your back. If you have a deeper curve in the upper back you may do better with a thicker pillow or more than one pillow. When you turn onto your side you may need to adjust the contour or number of pillows to stay in good alignment.

Those with low back pain sometimes do well with a towel roll wrapped around or tucked against the waist. When on your back, you may also resort to using a foam

wedge to support the legs in a bent-knee position, being careful to avoid blocking circulation behind the knees.

Some people with back pain require frequent movement to prevent pain. If you are one of these people, you may benefit from the resiliency of a flotation mattresses filled with either fluid or air. More specifically, according to physical therapist Eileen Vollowitz of Back Designs, look for a flotation mattress that can contour to the body for proper alignment. To accomplish this, air bed cores must not be too thick; water bed construction should be cylindrical.

I encourage you to conduct your own research, including spending at least 20 minutes trying out a mattress if you're seriously considering buying it. After all, you spend about a third of your life in bed – so make the most of it and sleep smart.



Sleeping with the spine in neutral alignment can help you wake up comfortable and refreshed. (Graphic courtesy of European Sleep Works)

Nancy M. Lowe is a Certified Ergonomist, Registered Physical Therapist and Certified Hand Therapist with over 20 years of experience treating and preventing injuries. For more ergonomics information visit <http://www.pacificcoastergo.com>

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