

# Social Connection & Pain in Older Adults

## Resources





# Resources

The resources in this booklet were developed by Turning Point, Eastern Health as part of the '*Opioid Use and Pain: Addressing Loneliness in Mature Adults (OP-ALMA)*' project. This pilot program was funded by Gandel Philanthropy with support from COTA Victoria. The OP-ALMA project aimed to increase the social connections of older adults living with chronic pain in the Yarra Ranges Shire.

## In this booklet you will find:

- **Pain management resources on the following topics:**
  - Reducing Loneliness
  - Flare-Up Management
  - Relaxation
  - Sleep
- **Ideas to increase connections in four different areas:**
  - Online Activities
  - Community Groups
  - Technology Support
  - Facebook Groups

Download all resources from the Turning Point website:  
[www.turningpoint.org.au/treatment/clinicians](http://www.turningpoint.org.au/treatment/clinicians) ('Clinician Resources')



The OP-ALMA team would like to acknowledge the support and contribution of the project steering committee.

We hope that you find these resources useful.

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# PAIN MANAGEMENT RESOURCES





# LONELINESS



OP-ALMA

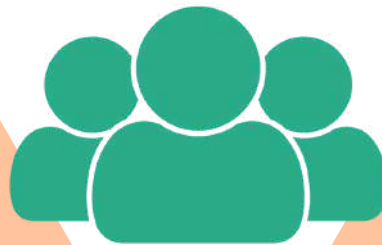
Research shows that feeling socially connected can help us better manage pain.



We can all feel lonely from time to time. However, when loneliness is a regular feeling, it can have a significant negative impact on our health.

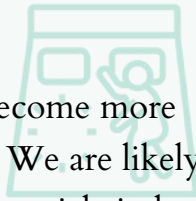


Loneliness is a subjective feeling, just like feeling angry, happy or sad. It is different to being alone.

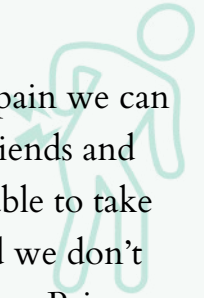


Research suggests that loneliness is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day<sup>1</sup> and can increase the risk of dementia by 64%<sup>2</sup>.

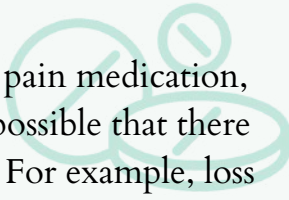
As we get older we may become more vulnerable to feeling lonely. We are likely to face health concerns, our social circles get smaller, and if we lose our spouse or partner, there is a greater chance of experiencing loneliness.



When living with chronic pain we can feel disconnected from friends and family. We might feel unable to take part in usual activities and we don't want to be a burden to others. Pain can often contribute to low mood and tiredness, causing us to withdraw from others which can trigger loneliness.



When taking strong pain medication, such as opioids, it is possible that there might be side effects. For example, loss of interest in usual activities, difficulty driving, and trouble thinking clearly<sup>3</sup>. This can make it hard to participate in activities we used to enjoy.



If we choose to, it is possible to make positive changes to our social lives. Identifying your interests and hobbies is a great way to start connecting with others.



Connecting with others might mean trying new things and learning (or re-learning) some social skills. With practice, we can feel more confident to reach out to others.

# 'EASE' INTO SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Keep in mind the acronym 'EASE'<sup>4</sup> to gradually increase your social connections

## E- Extend Yourself

Extend yourself by doing something you wouldn't usually do. Start with a small opportunity to connect with others and build your confidence. Don't expect too much! Look for opportunities in your daily life to show interest and curiosity to others. Ideas to try...



Wave 'hello' to your neighbour when you see them.



Hold open the door for someone at the shop.



Start a conversation with the shopkeeper, "Have you been busy?"

How could you start *extending yourself*? Write down your ideas.

## A- Action Plan

Starting a new activity is a great way to meet people with similar interests. Identify a new activity you would like to try and identify the required steps to get started. Write them down to create your 'action plan'. See the following page for some new activity ideas.

**New Activity:** *e.g., reading*

**Step 1:** *e.g., ask the local library about book clubs*

**Step 2:** *e.g., find out which book the club are currently reading*

**Step 3:** *e.g., attend the club*

## Activities to Try



Gardening



Reading



Tai-Chi



Knitting



Meditation



Bird Watching

## S- Selection

When selecting new friends, it is important to think about what qualities you are looking for. Strong relationships are those that are mutual and require a similar level of interest, commitment, and sharing on both sides. Aim to create quality relationships with others.

**What qualities am I looking for in a friend?**

*e.g., good sense of humour; honesty*

## E- Expect the best

Avoiding social activity may protect us from some negative social experiences, but it also prevents us from having positive social experiences. When starting a new activity or friendship, it is important to expect the best and remind ourselves of our past successes.

**Describe the last time you attended a social event and it was a success!**

*e.g., bus trip to Macedon Ranges in 2019 - I sat with a really interesting woman and chatted the whole way, which I enjoyed*



**CONNECT**

Scan this QR code to learn more about the health impacts of loneliness:

<http://bit.ly/opalma-lonely>



Scan this QR code to find volunteering opportunities in Victoria:  
<http://bit.ly/opalma-volunteer>



1. Holt-Lunstad, J., Robles, T. F., & Sbarra, D. A. (2017). Advancing social connection as a public health priority in the United States. *American Psychologist*, 72(6), 517–530.

2. Holwerda TJ et al. (2012). Feelings of loneliness, but not social isolation, predict dementia onset: Results from the Amsterdam Study of the Elderly (AMSTEL). *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry*, 85, 135–142

3. Baldini A, Von Korff M, Lin EH. (2012) A review of potential adverse effects of long-term opioid therapy: a practitioner's guide. *The Primary Care Companion for CNS Disorders*, 14(3), n/a.

4. Cacioppe, J. T., & Patrick, W. (2008). *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York London.





At times, the intensity of our pain can become much worse than usual. It might become very hard to perform our usual daily activities. This is called a flare-up and it will pass.

## Flare-up Triggers



Medication changes



Overdoing it on the days you are feeling good



Being more active than usual



Weather changes



Disrupted sleep



Disruptions to your usual routine



The trigger might be unknown



Increased stress, worry, or mood changes



A period of illness, such as having a cold



Spending too long in one position or doing one activity

A flare-up of *existing* pain does not signal more damage or injury<sup>1</sup>.

How we *respond* to a flare-up can make a difference to how long it will last.

By learning to accept flare-ups and focusing on how to manage them, we can turn down the flare's intensity and duration.



### TIP

Most activities have a flare-up point – we have pushed our limit or gone for too long, or too far. We might realise this right away, or the pain might be delayed until later that night or the next day.

## Tips for managing flare-ups



Research shows that people who use **active** coping strategies when managing flare-ups have a greater sense of wellbeing than those people who use **passive** coping strategies<sup>2</sup>.



**Active** strategies involve taking responsibility for managing our own pain. Examples include exercising, distraction, focusing on things other than pain, staying positive, and watching out for unhelpful thoughts<sup>3</sup>.



Minimise **passive** strategies; those that involve giving control to someone or something else to manage the pain. For example, relying only on medication or our GP to turn down our pain, or avoiding all activity<sup>3</sup>.



Stay as active as possible, pace yourself and modify your daily activities. Do not stop all activity completely. Some activity is better than none.

**CORTISOL** is a stress hormone. When we feel stressed, pressure or worry, our brain releases cortisol which can turn up our pain. Coping with these feelings can help reduce pain. Practicing relaxation, exercising and talking about our worries with someone who we trust can help.



Find ways to release helpful chemicals like **ENDORPHINS** and **SEROTONIN**. The brain releases these when you feel happy, loved or supported. They can help turn down the intensity of your pain<sup>1</sup>. Spend time doing activities you enjoy, and stay in touch with supportive friends and family.



# FLARE-UP PLAN

*Developing a flare-up plan can make us feel less helpless*

**These strategies help us to prevent and relieve flare-ups. Tick the ones that you already use. Circle the strategies that you would like to add to your flare-up plan.**



## PREVENT

**Regular use of these strategies can reduce the likelihood of a flare-up**

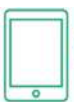
- Practice regular gentle exercise and stretching. Keep active.
- Take medications as prescribed by your GP.
- Be aware of your thoughts about pain - practice acceptance. Negative or catastrophising thoughts can lead to low mood and increased pain.
- Look after your health by eating a balanced diet and drinking water.
- Manage stress and worries as best you can. Avoiding caffeine, alcohol and cigarettes can help.
- Adjust your expectations of yourself. Don't give yourself a hard time if you can't do as much as you did before living with chronic pain.
- Stay connected with others and maintain supportive relationships.
- Practice relaxation and mindfulness regularly.
- Pace your activities. Break tasks into smaller parts and take regular breaks. Stop before your pain spikes.
- Avoid overdoing things. Prioritise your daily activities and take regular breaks.
- Take note of your flare-up triggers so that you can feel confident to manage your pain.
- Regularly apply a heat pack to help with relaxing muscles.



## RELIEVE

Apply these strategies to reduce the intensity and duration of a flare-up

- Try some gentle stretching or self-massage.
- Use heat or ice packs as appropriate.
- Use positive self-talk and be kind to yourself. For example, 'This flare-up will pass,' 'I know what to do'. Avoid catastrophising.
- Take medications as prescribed or recommended by your GP. Do not increase your pain medication without consulting your GP.
- Reduce or modify activity but keep moving and take brief rest periods. Becoming fearful of movement can lead to more problems like losing muscle conditioning <sup>4</sup>.
- Talk to supportive friends or family. Research shows that when pain is validated by others, the intensity can go down and physical function improves <sup>5</sup>.
- Distract yourself. Watch a funny movie, listen to your favourite music, call a friend for a chat.
- Focus on things that are within your control - your thoughts and actions. Focusing on the pain can lead to feeling hopeless and helpless.
- Reduce feelings of loneliness by connecting with others online.
- Practice calm breathing and relaxation.



## CONNECT

Relieve stress by practicing calm breathing. Scan this QR code to try an exercise:  
<http://bit.ly/opalma-breathe>



Scan this QR code to watch a clip that describes a way of thinking about chronic pain:  
<http://bit.ly/opalma-pain>



1. Butler, D. S., & Moseley, G. L. (2013). *Explain Pain*. (2nd ed). Noigroup Publications.

2. Jensen, M. P., Turner, J. A., Romano, J. M., & Karoly, P. (1991). Coping with chronic pain: a critical review of the literature. *Pain*, 47(3), 249-283.

3. Brown, Gregory K., & Nicassio, Perry M. (1987). Development of a questionnaire for the assessment of active and passive coping strategies in chronic pain patients. *Pain*, 31(1), 53-64.

4. Vlaeyen, J. W., & Linton, S. J. (2000). Fear-avoidance and its consequences in chronic musculoskeletal pain: A state of the art. *Pain*, 85(3), 317-332.

5. Andrade Carvalho, S., Pinto-Gouveia, J., Gillanders, D., & Castilho, P. (2021). Perceived validation and criticism in pain: Development of a new measure in chronic pain. *European Journal of Pain*, 25(1), 136-148.



# RELAXATION OP-ALMA

Relaxation is a helpful pain management skill. With practice, we can reduce muscle tension and pain, calm our mind, reduce distress, and improve sleep.



We all relax in different ways. However, our favourite activities might not always be possible when we need to calm ourselves. We might be in too much pain, it could be the middle of the night, or we might be in a busy shopping centre. Using our breath, and focusing on our body, we can learn how to achieve relaxation. This skill can be used anywhere at any time.

## Relaxation Response



Chronic pain can be very stressful.



Stress can make chronic pain worse by increasing muscle tightness which then increases our pain, leading to even more tension<sup>1</sup>. Relaxation helps us break this cycle.



Our body's relaxation response involves releasing chemicals and brain signals that slow down the systems in our body<sup>2</sup>.



The relaxation response turns down the effects of stress and worry on our body, reducing tension and slowing our heart rate, among other things<sup>2</sup>.



With lots of practice, we can become very skilled at triggering our relaxation response.

# CALM BREATHING

*Practice this exercise to trigger the body's relaxation response*



Make yourself comfortable, lying down or sitting in a chair. Close your eyes.

Take three long, slow, deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth.

Breathe naturally and slowly.

Imagine that your body is heavy and floppy.



Each time you exhale, repeat the word 'Relax' to yourself.

When your mind wanders, gently focus on your breath, and the word 'Relax'.

Imagine that with each breath your body is becoming heavier and more relaxed.

Continue for about 10 minutes.



Before you finish this exercise, sit quietly for a moment or two.

Practice two times a day, for at least 10 minutes each time.



**Make relaxation practice a daily habit. Practice for at least 10 minutes at the same time each day. What is the best time to practice? Write it down.**



**TIP**

Practice relaxation when you are not feeling worried, tense, or in a great deal of pain. We need lots of practice - just like learning how to play a musical instrument or learning how to swim.

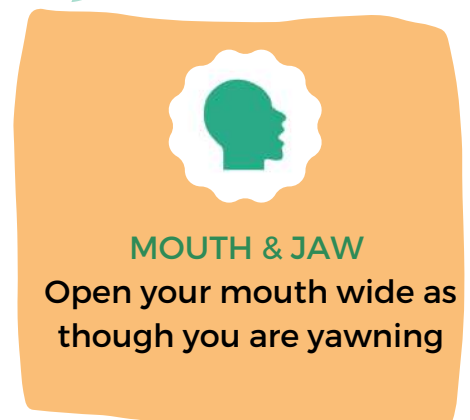
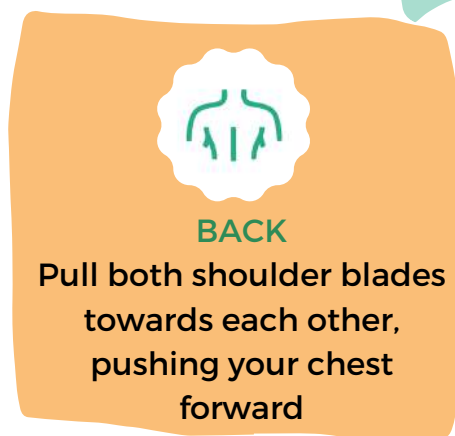
# PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

*Focus on each part of the body, tensing and relaxing your muscles*

This technique helps reduce muscle tension and pain<sup>3-5</sup>. With practice, we can easily recognise tension in our muscles which we can then release as we go about our day.

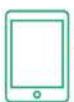
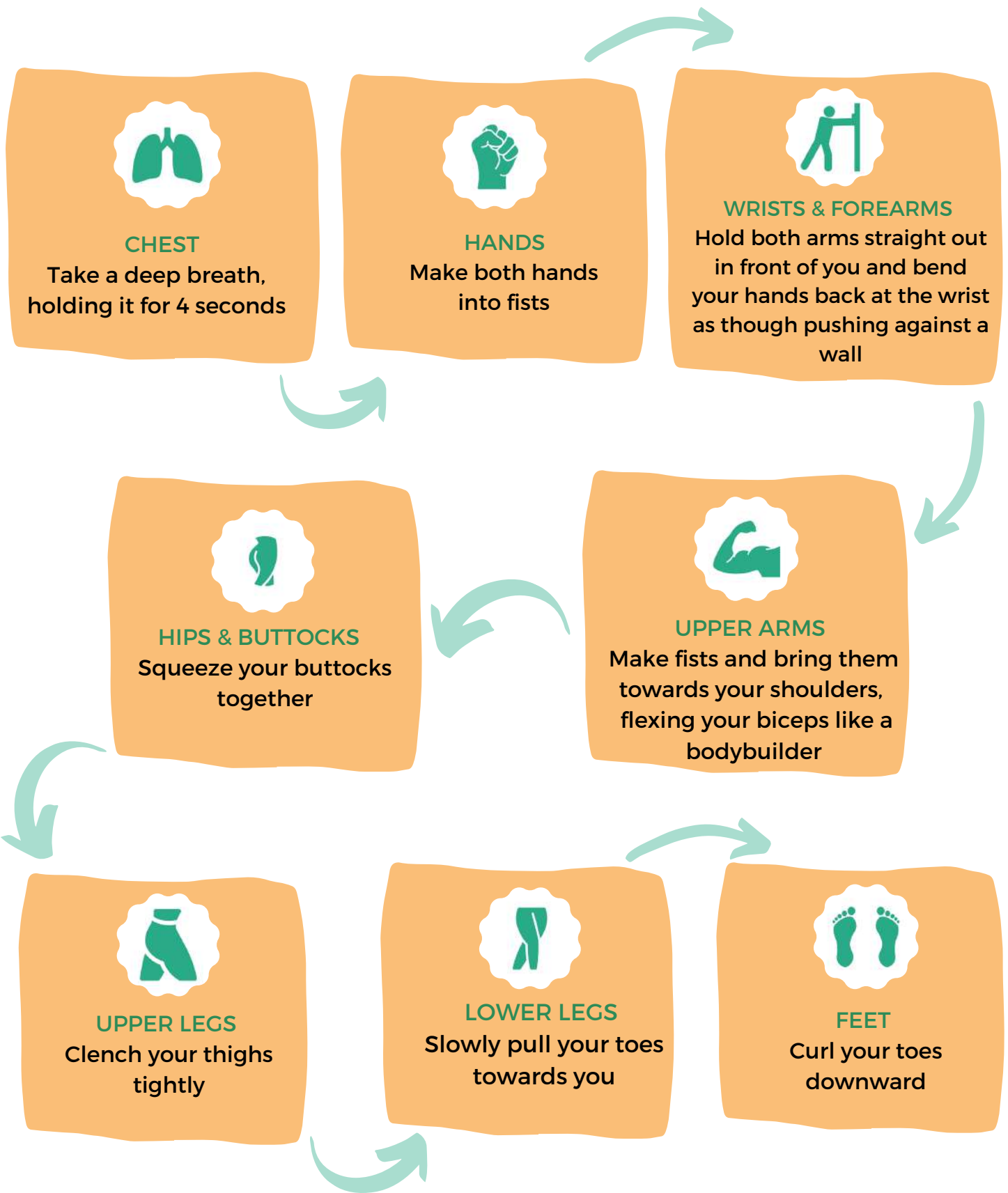
**Please do not tighten any muscles that feel painful.  
Skip any parts that are uncomfortable.**

- Make yourself comfortable, sitting in a chair or lying down. Close your eyes.
- Breathe in as you tense the first muscle for five seconds. Then exhale, relaxing completely.
- Pause for 10 seconds, then move on to the next muscle.
- When you have focused on all muscles, take three deep breaths. Gently open your eyes.
- Start at your forehead...



Scan this QR code to listen to a  
Progressive Muscle Relaxation exercise  
[bit.ly/opalma-relax](https://bit.ly/opalma-relax)





**CONNECT**

Download a calm breathing app:



The Breathing App



Mellow Me

Visit

[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) and type 'Guided Relaxation' into the search bar:



1. McCaffery, M., & Pasero, C. (1999). *Pain: Clinical manual*. (2nd ed). St. Louis, Missouri: Mosby.

2. Benson, H., Beary, J., & Carol, M. (1974). The relaxation response. *Psychiatry*, 37, 37-46.

3. Bernstein, D. A., & Borkovec, T. D. (1973). *Progressive relaxation training: a manual for the helping professions*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press.

4. Baird, C. L., & Sands, L. (2004). A pilot study of the effectiveness of guided imagery with progressive muscle relaxation to reduce chronic pain and mobility difficulties of osteoarthritis. *Pain Management Nursing*, 5(3), 97-104.

5. Kwekkeboom, K. L., & Gretarsdottir, E. (2006). Systematic review of relaxation interventions for pain. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 38(3), 269-277.





# SLEEP



Good quality sleep helps us feel refreshed and able to manage pain better. There are many different strategies we can try to improve our sleep.

## Sleep Duration



Over the age of 65, we need between 7-8 hours of sleep<sup>1</sup>. As we get older, we might feel like we need less sleep, and sleep might feel lighter compared to when we were younger. We might fall asleep and wake up earlier, too.

## Stages of Sleep

While sleeping, our body cycles through different stages of sleep: rapid eye movement (REM), light and deep sleep. One sleep cycle, where we move through all stages, lasts for about 90 minutes and repeats throughout the night. As we get older, our sleep cycles change. We spend more time in light sleep, and less in deep sleep<sup>2</sup>.



## Body Clock



Our bodies rely on cues such as time of day and light to know when to start initiating sleep. A hormone called melatonin helps regulate our body clock and our sleep-wake cycle. If we don't get into bed and fall asleep, our bodies return to a more alert state - we have missed catching the sleep wave. We need to wait for the cycle to repeat itself so we feel tired again and can catch that wave.

## Naps

Long naps during the day can interfere with our ability to get to sleep at night. We can often feel groggy after waking from a long nap, and it can be harder to get to sleep at bedtime. Limiting afternoon naps to 20 minutes will be less disruptive to nighttime sleep.



### TIP

It is hard to give up old habits, but if you can stick at a new routine you will see improvements! It might take a couple of weeks before you notice the benefits.

## Opioid Medication



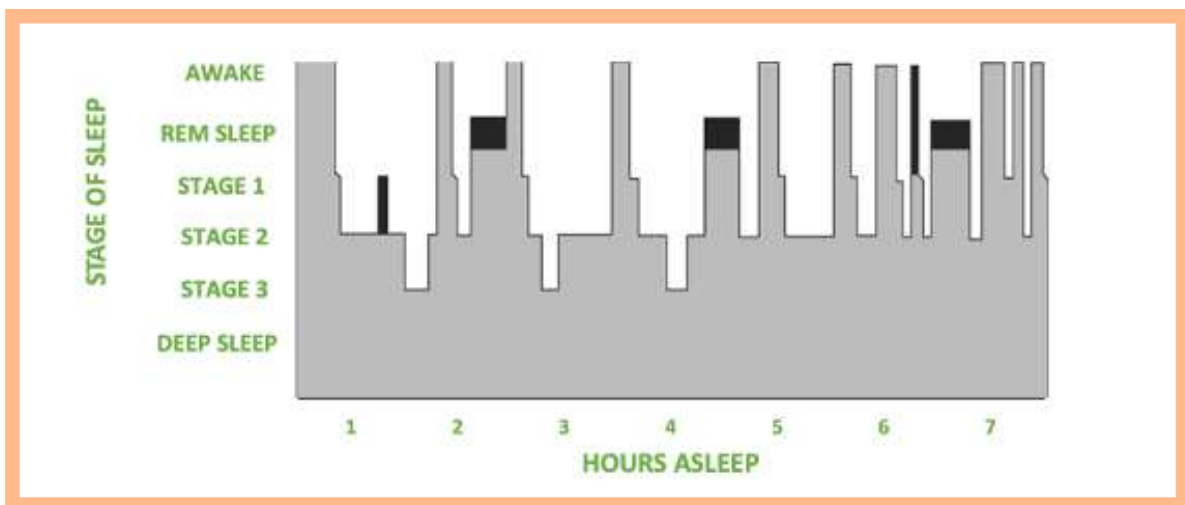
Taking opioid medication over a long time can impact our sleep<sup>3</sup>. We might find our bodies spend less time in deep and REM sleep, so our sleep can feel lighter.

## Sleep Cycle

Throughout the night, we cycle through different stages of sleep, which all have different functions<sup>2</sup>:



- **REM:** dreaming and memory consolidation.
- **Light sleep (stage 1-3):** body slows down and is relaxed.
- **Deep sleep:** body restores and rests.



## SLEEP APPS FOR A SMART PHONE OR TABLET

Download one of these apps from the Google Play Store or the Apple App Store to help you fall asleep and understand your sleep cycle.



Sleep Stream 2



Insight Timer



Sleep Time



Nature Soundscapes



Sleep Cycle

# SLEEP HYGIENE STRATEGIES

*Changing our habits and the environment can help improve sleep*

**These strategies can contribute to a better night's sleep. Tick the ones that you would like to try. Use these strategies consistently to get into new, helpful sleep habits.**



## How can I catch the wave of sleep?

- Get in to bed when you are feeling tired. After 20 minutes, if you are still awake, get up and do something calming until you fall asleep. Avoid bright lights - they will keep you awake.
- Have a regular time that you go to bed and get up in the morning.
- A bedtime routine signals that it is time to start winding down. Put on your pyjamas, enjoy a warm drink, and avoid stimulating activities like watching exciting TV shows.
- Eating meals and exercising at regular times can be helpful to re-train your sleep. Try to avoid alcohol and caffeine too close to bedtime.



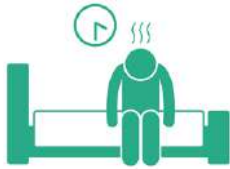
## Pain stops me from becoming comfortable at night...

- Include comfort strategies as part of your daily bedtime routine. Prepare heat packs, prop up pillows, and take any medication that your GP has recommended.
- Make sure that your bedroom, and bedding, is not too hot or cold. Find the comfortable temperature for you.



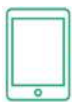
## When I get into bed my mind focuses on my pain...

- Try switching your attention to something that relaxes you. Listening to your favourite music, audiobooks, or relaxing music can help.
- Focus on slowing down your breathing, as you breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. This can help your body feel relaxed. Remind yourself 'even if I cannot sleep, at least I am relaxing'.
- It can help to set a 'worry time' several hours before you go to bed. During this time, think about and problem solve any worries. Keep a notepad by the bed – if worries keep you awake, write them down to think about tomorrow. Bed is for sleep, not worry!



## I often wake during the night and find it hard to get back to sleep...

- This is normal. If we try not to worry about waking up, it will be easier to get back to sleep. You will catch the next wave of sleep if you practice calming activities.
- Keep a lamp within reach and remove any rugs so you won't trip if you get up.
- Try distracting yourself. Count backwards from 100, count your breaths, or play some relaxing music.
- Face your alarm clock away from you. Watching the time pass can keep us awake.



**CONNECT**

Scan this code to hear sleep tips from people living with chronic pain:  
[bit.ly/opalma-sleep](http://bit.ly/opalma-sleep)



Scan this code to learn about sleep disorders and when to seek treatment:  
[bit.ly/opalma-sleep-tips](http://bit.ly/opalma-sleep-tips)



1. Hirshkowitz, M., Whiton, K., Albert, S. M., Alessi, C., Bruni, O., DonCarlos, L.,...Catesby Ware, J. (2015).

National Sleep Foundation's updated sleep duration recommendations: final report. *Sleep Health*, 1, 233-243.

2. Kales, A., & Kales, J.D. (1974). Recent findings in the diagnosis and treatment of disturbed sleep. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 290 (9), 487-499.

3. Wang, D., & Teichtahl, H. (2007) Opioids, sleep architecture and sleep-disordered breathing. *Sleep Medicine Reviews*, 11 (1), 35-46.

# OPTIONS FOR INCREASING CONNECTIONS



# Facebook Groups



Wellbeing, gardening, pain management and library groups for older adults

*Here are some suggestions to get you started.*



Visit these websites to find out more

Use the camera on your smart phone or tablet to scan the QR codes



Council on the Ageing Victoria (COTA)

*Raising awareness of issues faced by older Australians.*

**<http://bit.ly/opalma-co>**



Australian Pain Management Association

*Connect with others who have chronic pain.*

**<http://bit.ly/opalma-am>**



Friends for Good

*Ideas for wellbeing & connection.*

**<http://bit.ly/opalma-fr>**



Living Our Best Life

*Practical tips, fun activities & events in the Knox region.*

**<http://bit.ly/opalma-lo>**



Emerald Garden Club

*Post questions about your garden & find information about face-to-face meetings.*

**<http://bit.ly/opalma-em>**



Eastern Regional Libraries

*Articles on history, culture, gardening & more. Information about library activities.*

**<http://bit.ly/opalma-el>**



# Technology Support



Workshops, courses and websites supporting older adults to learn new technology skills

*Here are some links to get you started.*



Visit these websites to find out more

Use the camera on your smart phone or tablet to scan the QR codes



Be Connected  
*Learn how to set up your device & make video calls.*

**<http://bit.ly/opalma-be>**



Woori Community House  
*Learn how to find reliable information online.*

**<http://bit.ly/opalma-wo>**



Mt Evelyn Community House  
*One-on-one technology support.*

**<http://bit.ly/opalma-mt>**



Cire Services: Chirnside & Yarra Junction  
*Take your own device & learn to use it.*

**<http://bit.ly/opalma-ci>**



Yarra Glen Living & Learning Centre  
*iPad, iPhone & computer classes.*

**<http://bit.ly/opalma-ya>**



Healesville Living & Learning Centre  
*Advanced & beginner computer courses.*

**<http://bit.ly/opalma-he>**



Access computers, printing & digital books.

Eastern Regional Libraries: **<http://bit.ly/opalma-ea>**

# Community Groups



Walking, photography,  
and social groups for  
older adults in the  
Yarra Ranges Shire

*Here are some groups  
to get you started.*



Visit these websites to find out more

Use the camera on your smart phone or tablet to scan the QR codes



The Graduates  
*Walking group.*

<http://bit.ly/opalma-gr>



Photography Club  
*Workshops, competitions & speakers.*

<http://bit.ly/opalma-ph>



Yarra Ranges  
Men's Health Project  
*Wellbeing & social groups for  
men.*

<http://bit.ly/opalma-me>



Country Women's  
Association  
*Cooking, craft & connection for  
women.*

<http://bit.ly/opalma-cw>



Men's Shed  
*Woodwork activities.*

<http://bit.ly/opalma-ms>



Probus  
*Social activities for retirees.*

<http://bit.ly/opalma-pr>



Volunteering Victoria  
*Directory of volunteer  
opportunities.*

<http://bit.ly/opalma-vo>



EACH Social Activity  
*Based on participants' interests and  
needs.*

<http://bit.ly/opalma-so>

# Online Activities

Exercise, craft, education,  
music and friendship  
websites for  
older adults

*Here are some links  
to get you started.*



Visit these websites to find out more

Use the camera on your smart phone or tablet to scan the QR codes



Ageless Grace  
*Strength & balance exercises  
you can do at home.*  
<http://bit.ly/opalma-ag>



Crafts for Seniors  
*Videos & written instructions for  
craft activities.*  
<http://bit.ly/opalma-cr>



U3A Online Courses  
*Online learning.*  
<http://bit.ly/opalma-u3>



Aurous Radio  
*Music from the 1950s-1970s.*  
<http://bit.ly/opalma-ra>



Virtual Programs  
*Crafts, games & videos.*  
<http://bit.ly/opalma-vi>



Tai Chi and Qigong  
*Individual & group Zoom classes.*  
<http://bit.ly/opalma-qi>



Living Longer Living Stronger  
*Strength, balance & mobility  
classes through COTA.*  
<http://bit.ly/opalma-li>



Friendline  
*Connect to a friendly volunteer.*  
<http://bit.ly/opalma-fd>  
1800 424 287

