

# Waking up in pain?

Your sleep position may need adjusting, says **Amanda Schupak**

**T**here is no one "right" way to sleep, said Dr Indira Gurubhagavatula, a professor of sleep medicine at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine in the US. But if you are waking up with discomfort or stiffness, or having restless nights, certain adjustments to your sleeping posture could help. Here are some of the most common issues associated with how people sleep and what to do about them.

## On your side

Many of us sleep on our sides with no problem. But for some people — especially those with joint issues or who are older — it can put a lot of pressure on the shoulder, hip and knees, said Dr Rohan Jotwani, a pain medicine specialist at New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York City, US.

Sleeping on top of a memory foam or gel mattress pad can help by distributing your weight more evenly, he said. Placing a pillow between your knees can also reduce hip, knee and lower back pain by keeping your legs and hips aligned.

When you're on your side, using a pillow that is either too thick or too thin can force your spine out of alignment, leading to muscle and joint strain. Or it can put pressure on nerves, causing pain, tingling or weakness in your shoulders, arms or upper back, Dr Gurubhagavatula said.

Those who have a deviated septum may find that sleeping on their side affects how well they breathe, said Dr Gerald Suh, an ear, nose, throat and sleep specialist in Princeton, New Jersey, US. The condition occurs when the thin layer of cartilage and bone that divides the nasal cavity is off-centre or crooked. It is common, he said, affecting probably more than 80 per cent of people, though only about 30 per cent notice an influence on breathing.

For some, it's easier to breathe when they sleep on the side that the narrower nostril is on, allowing air to flow unimpeded through the wider one, Dr Suh said.



## On your back

The goal when sleeping is to maintain the natural curvature of the spine and neck "without creating too many bends and twists and turns", Dr Jotwani said. Sleeping on your back is best for maintaining this alignment, he said, though it can also cause or exacerbate other issues.

The symptoms of obstructive sleep apnoea, for instance — which occurs when the mus-

cles in the throat relax during sleep and cause snoring and temporary pauses in breathing — can worsen when lying face up, said Azadeh Yadollahi, a scientist who studies sleep and airway disorders at the University Health Network in Toronto, Canada.

If you have sleep apnoea, sleeping on your side can help keep the airway open and let you breathe more freely, Dr Gurubhagavatula said.

Sleeping on your back may

also worsen acid reflux symptoms by allowing stomach acid to seep into the oesophagus. And while any sleeping position can lead to nasal congestion, lying face up can cause you to feel even more stuffy, especially when dealing with a cold or allergies, Dr Suh said.

Propping up the top half of your body with a pillow or a wedge-shaped bolster helps relieve acid reflux, Dr Gurubhagavatula said. Or try elevating the head of your bed by putting

blocks under the legs of your bed frame, she said.

Some research also suggests that sleeping on your left side can help, too.

## On your stomach

This is the least common sleeping position, Dr Gurubhagavatula said. It also tends to be the hardest on your spine.

Having your head turned to one side all night strains the neck, Dr Jotwani said. And that can be compounded by a thick pillow that angles your neck upward. The position can also hyperextend your lower back. In a review published in 2025, researchers found that sleeping on the stomach is associated with more lower back pain than sleeping on the back or side.

If you enjoy sleeping on your stomach but wake up with low back pain, it can help to put a small pillow under your pelvis. This prevents your abdomen from sinking into the mattress and putting too much arch in your back, Dr Jotwani said. But if possible, he added, sleep on your back or side for better alignment.

## Change position

Switching to a new position "can be very daunting", Dr Jotwani said. He recommended identifying a new position and then trying to spend at least a little time in it each night.

Over time, your body will get used to it. Strategic placement of pillows, special cushions or devices can help keep you in one position throughout the night, Dr Gurubhagavatula said.

To stay on your side, try placing a body pillow behind you, she suggested. There are also cushions that you can strap onto your back to keep you on your side, and electronic devices that vibrate when they sense that you've rolled onto your back. These are the technological equivalent of getting elbowed by your bed partner, said Yadollahi.

If you're new to sleeping on your back, Dr Gurubhagavatula said you might be more comfortable with a small pillow under your knees, even if it feels awkward for the first few nights.