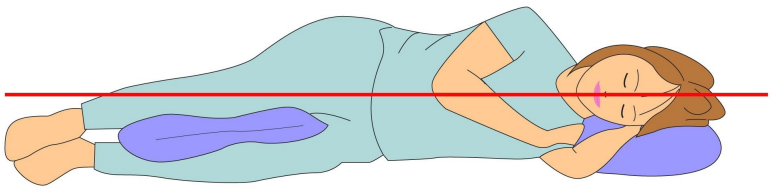
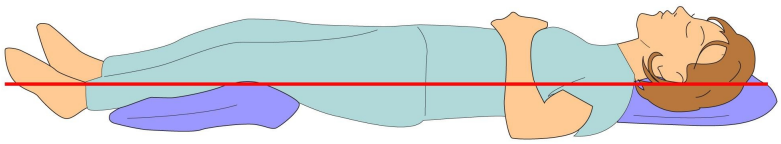
Ergonomics - Sleeping

Because we spend 1/3 of our lives sleeping, it is important to give some real attention to your sleeping posture.

Here are my ***Top 6 Sleeping No-Nos***:

- Do not sleep on your front (prone) Do not sleep on an old mattress
- Do not use more than one pillow
- Do not sleep in the recovery position (three quarters prone – almost stomach sleeping) Do not sleep in a tight fetal position
- Do not sleep more than eight hours



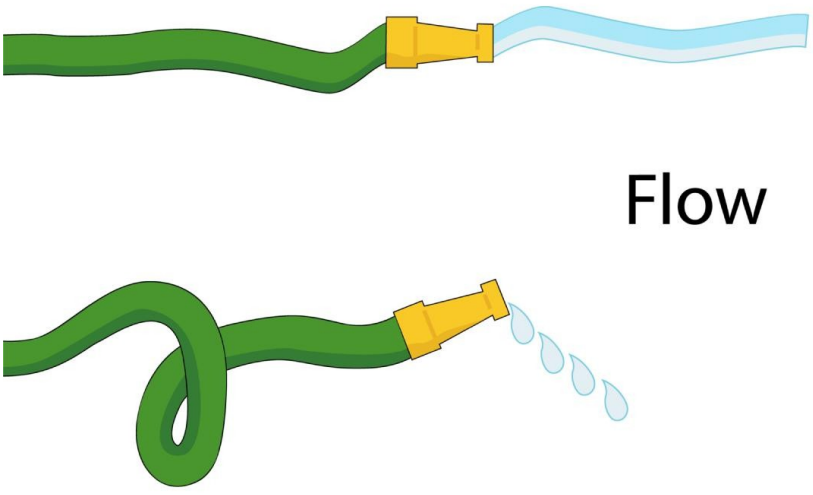


When sleeping on your front (prone) you have to twist your neck and spinal cord 90º to lay your head on the pillow; that puts massive strain on the neck and can cause headache. In this position,

the nerves and blood vessels that run through the neck to the head receive most of the tissue stress.

Further, when sleeping on your front the lumbar region can sink into a swayback position, putting hours of additional strain on your lower back joints and discs. Over time, this can begin causing degeneration and wear.

Imagine a garden hose with water running through it. Think of the water as your nerves, and the hose as your bony spine, acting as a channel for the nerves. Now imagine twisting the hose (as your neck twists when you sleep on your stomach). The nerves are put under great tension in this twisted sleeping position – and because the nervous system directs and coordinates the functions of all your body's parts (organs, muscles, hormones, glands, digestion, even your brain) you can begin to imagine how a twisted spinal cord is a potential health risk over time.



If you find that even when you start off sleeping on your back or side, you keep waking on your front, start sleeping with a pillow between your knees. This will help prevent rolling over onto your front. It may take time for this to work fully – you may find that you still roll onto your front occasionally – but eventually you will learn a new sleeping habit.

Don’t be cheap when buying a mattress. You spend one third of your life sleeping, so invest in a good night’s sleep. Personally, I love my memory foam mattress. The only downside is that it can get a little hot. I tend toward chilly toes in winter, so I don't mind. You never need to flip a memory foam mattress and if you sleep beside someone, you won't bounce when they move.

Use only one pillow. The object of sleeping with a pillow is simply to fill the space between your ear and shoulder. Too many pillows or too small a pillow means your neck is likely to tilt down toward your shoulder, or be forced up toward your ear. The material you choose for your pillow is a matter of personal preference. I'm not a fanatic about orthopedic pillows, because they are generally only offered in small, medium and large, and that isn't exact enough for each individual body size. Note in the figure above how the head stays completely horizontal when side lying. That is the goal.

Sleeping on your back is also a good position to choose. Adding a pillow under your knees takes the strain from the lower back and hips. If you prefer to sleep on your side, use a pillow between your knees and avoid the recovery position, which will twist the spine.

Notice the position of your knees. Resist the urge to pull the knees right up into your body (fetal position) as this will flatten the lumbar spine. Ideally, keep your knees, thighs and hips in line (similar to their positions when standing) to maintain a gentle curve (lordosis) in your lower back.

Do not sleep more than 8 hours. This is good advice for anyone, but if you have flatback you need to pay particular attention to it. During sleep you gain height, as the cartilage discs absorb water, a little like a sponge. People with flatback posture often have worn spinal discs, with less cushioning than in those people whose discs are healthy. The longer you sleep, the stiffer you will be on waking.

If you have morning stiffness then I am definitely speaking to you. When the discs regain some height during the night, all the tissues become taut and lengthened, and that is why it takes an hour or two after waking before you limber up and the tissues become slack and more mobile again, because your disc size has decreased.