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Pillow talk

Sleeping positions affect your health

By **Claudia M. Caruana**

A NIGHT OF tossing and turning can do more than make you grumpy in the morning; it can cause you pain or aggravate pain you already have.

Often, the problem is your pillow and your sleep position in bed.

Karen Friel, chair of the physical therapy department at the New York Institute of Technology School of Health Professions, says, "While sleeping, we need to maintain the proper alignment of the spine and keep it in its relatively natural positions." That means maintaining the normal curvatures seen in the upper, middle and lower regions of your body.

Your neck pillow has an important role keeping you in the right position, Friel says. "Pillows can be used differently, depending on how the person sleeps. If someone sleeps on his back, a neck pillow is vitally important in maintaining the proper position of the cervical spine," she notes. "A neck roll is appropriate for 'back-sleepers' and those who sleep on their side as it maintains the cervical spine in neutral without causing too much flexion or side flexion. In side lying, a large body pillow can be hugged to help keep the

spine in a more neutral posture. A long pillow can also be placed lengthwise between the thighs and knees in side lying to keep the

When to pitch your pillow

A LONGTIME BED pillow, like a child's teddy bear, often is difficult to give up. Nevertheless, sometimes you need to do it. Here are some tips.

- A pillow that is flattened and never regains its bounce, that is disintegrating or that becomes musty or moldy because you slept with wet hair, needs a replacement.
- Purchasing a new mattress? You probably need a new pillow, too.
- If you are using a therapeutic pillow and it is not helping you or you are feeling worse, stop using it, recommends physiatrist Richard Scott Krupkin.
- To keep your pillow fresh, use cotton or polyester/cotton-blend pillow protectors under the pillowcase. Wash them, as well as your pillowcase, frequently.—*CMC*

hips in good alignment."

Richard Scott Krupkin, a physiatrist (a medical doctor who specializes in physical medicine and rehabilitation) at the Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, in Cleveland, Ohio, says that pillows can be used to relieve pain and discomfort caused by several "common musculoskeletal conditions, such as neck and back pain due to sprains, strains, arthritis and other rheumatic or orthopedic problems."

He adds that pillows also can help with clearing fluids from swollen areas, draining

wounds and providing support after hip replacement and joint surgery.

(Important caveat: Krupkin says that following surgery, you do not want to keep your knees in a flexed position with pillows under the back of the knees for prolonged periods, as doing so can cause muscle shortening.)

A primary goal of "pillow treatment" is achieving the most comfortable position and proper alignment of the spine or lower back, hips, knees, etc. while in bed, Krupkin notes.

For example, he says, "A pillow under your knees often is recommended while lying on your back to relieve low back stress from tight hamstring muscles."

Neck pain? Krupkin says a feather pillow may be preferable to a contoured pillow, although many of the foam pillows on the market might be helpful. He says, "My best advice: Avoid thick or stiff pillows since they tend to hyper-extend the neck."

Robert Oexman, a chiropractor and director of the Sleep to Live Institute, in Mebane, North Carolina, says it is critical that your "neck pillow is the correct height for your sleeping position and the firmness of mattress you have. If you are a side sleeper, you will need a taller pillow than a back sleeper. If you have a firm mattress, you will need more pillow than a person with a softer mattress. It is never appropriate to sleep with multiple pillows."

Krupkin is quick to admit that there aren't many conclusive scientific studies that confirm the usefulness of pillows as a therapeutic aid, but says "most

physicians and physical therapists believe they can be beneficial." He says a study in *The Journal of Rheumatology* in 2007 indicated that exercise combined with the use of the right pillow improved sleep and chronic neck pain.

What needs to be emphasized about this research, Krupkin says, are two critical factors. One factor is that persons with chronic pain experience disturbed sleep, and lack of restorative sleep can make one even more sensitive to pain. The other factor is the

importance of exercise as part of a daily regimen for persons with chronic pain.

So when it comes to pillows, comfort and alignment are key, but a pillow alone is probably not a panacea or cure for pain, Krupkin stresses.

He also points out, "Pillows and cushions, like all medical devices, have their risks. Make sure to ask your healthcare provider for guidance on what might be best for you." ■

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The Costco Connection

Costco and Costco.com carry a variety of down, hypoallergenic, latex and memory foam pillows in many sizes as well as standard, memory foam and adjustable mattresses (see Buyer's Pick on page 103).