

# What Is the Best Position for Sleep?

Analysis by Dr. Peter Martone

December 26, 2023

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › If you frequently toss and turn during sleep, chances are you're a side sleeper or stomach sleeper. For sound, healthy sleep, you need to sleep on your back, in a neutral position, with a pillow under your neck, not your head, to maintain proper spinal curve
- › Poor sleeping position is a common cause of aches and pains. It can also trigger or aggravate arthritic conditions
- › If you're a chronic side sleeper, it may take up to four months to retrain your body to comfortably sleep on your back. It may take even longer if you're used to sleeping on your stomach

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published October 12, 2017.***

My name is Dr. Peter Martone. I am a chiropractor and an exercise physiologist. This is my "sleep story." When I think back to my earliest memories when I was a child, I can still remember wanting to sleep on my side, which faced the crucifix on the wall in my room. I felt secure and protected and every morning I would end up at the end of my bed or even on the floor. I never stayed in one position.

As years passed I continued to be a side sleeper because that is what people do. It is how my doctors told me to sleep; I saw commercials depicting people sleeping on their sides; and my parents even bought me a side sleeper pillow. So, there I was a side sleeper and a non-thinker. I just did what other people told me to do because that is

what we do. I was a side sleeper until I started having pain. Then I started thinking about the cause – and my life changed.

I can still remember the day I started to think. It changed everything. Before I begin, I want to make this point clear: Thinking never happens all at once. To change your paradigm (way of thinking) it takes multiple events to happen that bring your awareness to a specific topic – just like reading this article might get you to become more aware of your sleeping position.

Although my hope is that you just take my advice blindly, I understand my goal is to get you to start questioning that status quo. Like I tell my patients: "Free your mind and your health will follow."

## **The Day I Began to Think**

I was watching the movie "Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon" in 2000 and the two actors came out of the room after "cuddling" all night. The camera gave a quick glimpse of the room they came out of. It showed what the two actors slept on, and to my amazement it was just a thin pad for their body and a block of wood in lieu of a pillow for their head (we will get back to this later).

I can remember thinking, "Ouch, that would be so uncomfortable, but then again the movie was set back in the 19th century – that is all they had."

One of my passions is body biomechanics, or how the body moves and functions. I took a lot of pride in being a pain-free person until one day I had a little too much alcohol to drink at a party and fell asleep in my bed watching TV on my side. To make a long story short, I could not move my arm when I woke up.

I slept on my arm, instigating a frozen shoulder (sprain of the shoulder) just by sleeping on it the wrong way. It was one of the worst pains I had ever experienced. The pain traveled all the way into my neck. I then started to think about the times I would wake up in the morning over the years and either have shoulder pain or neck pain.

Was it the drinking? Was it the sleeping position? Or was it the pillow? Now I was getting close. I was starting to question something that I had taken for granted for years, namely my sleeping position.

## **How Your Bed and Pillow Affect Your Body Mechanics**

Let's take the two lessons I learned from that movie scene and my episodes of falling asleep in the wrong position and put them together. Beds are made to be more and more comfortable and absorb your body's weight to decrease pressure points. They support you as you sleep on your side, but what about back in the 19th century? There would be no way you could sleep on your side with just a block of wood and a towel.

You would be tossing and turning all night long because your body weight would be distributed over a small surface area causing pressure points. The only way you would be able to sleep is on your back, which distributes your weight over the greatest surface area – which is how the actors slept in the movie.

Try lying on your side and watching a two-hour movie. You would not be able to do it without turning (trust me; I tried it). You can only stay on your side for a short time until something either goes numb or gets uncomfortable.

And this is one of the reasons why you toss and turn all night long. The area of the brain that senses pain and the area of the brain that controls sleep are very close. When your body is in pain it wakes up, or the body moves you out of that position (tossing and turning). That reflex is suppressed when you have taken drugs like alcohol, sleeping pills or pain meds or are extremely tired.

So, what happens is that you stay in your abnormal body position (side or stomach sleeping) for prolonged periods of time and pull muscles or sprain ligaments.

Now that is just one night's effect. Let's talk about my main reason for writing this article. It is what you do on a regular basis that defines your health and well-being. Remember, your body adapts to your daily lifestyle habits. What you do every day is what

defines your current state of health. Years and years of side sleeping and stomach sleeping cause damage to your spine that your body internalizes.

## **Structure Affects Function**

As a chiropractor, I believe your structure directly effects your function. The structure of your spine effects the way your nervous system functions and, ultimately, your health and well-being. This concept is a lot more than people can handle, so I will keep it basic for the scope of this article.

I will talk about biomechanics and about an epidemic that thousands of patients have in common, from 10-year-olds to 90-year-olds. It is the epidemic of spinal degeneration, or what the medical profession calls arthritis.

I started to ask the question "Why do so many patients have spinal degeneration which leads to back and neck pain and ultimately health related conditions?" I started to look at patterns and apply a law to my thinking called the "Davis Law," which states that tissue remolds itself according to imposed demands.

Maintaining proper curves of your spine is critically important in helping your body distribute stress when you walk or move. Another way to think about it is that the shape of your spine works like a big spring and acts like a shock absorber.

When you lose the curves of your spine, you cause stress points within the spine, and as Davis Law states you will cause scar tissue to develop in those areas of the spine where you lose the curves. This restriction of motion in the joint leads to degeneration (arthritis) in that area.

As a culture, we are spending more and more time on computers, driving or texting on our phones. All of these positions are done in a forward head posture (head forward position). I find that the average person can spend up to eight hours a day in forward head position posture. This must be offset if you want to maintain a natural curve in your cervical spine.

# The Importance of Sleep Posture

The only other time you are in one position for another eight hours is at night when you are sleeping. It is important to offset your forward head position posture of your workweek and daily texting habits. Sleep is when your body heals and grows. Sleep is an opportunity for your body to offset or externalize the stressor that you have exposed it to throughout the day.

The only way to do this is to sleep on your back with a pillow under your neck. I repeat: under your NECK (not your HEAD), supporting your cervical spine. We are in the final product design of a pillow what will help you lie on your back and stay on your back. It is important to support your neck and not your head. Supporting your head or using the wrong pillow in the wrong position will reinforce an abnormal curve. Please watch my video at the top to see how to properly use your pillow.

When I talk to patients about sleeping position, the most common thing I hear is that I start on my \_\_\_\_\_ but I end up on my \_\_\_\_\_. Fill in the blank. They toss and turn all night long because as we stated earlier, they do not sleep in a neutral position and their brain senses they are in pain, which causes them to toss and turn. Remember, the pain is caused from side sleeping for two reasons:

1. Weight distributed over a small surface area as compared to sleeping on your back
2. Abnormal lateral forces applied to your spine from side sleeping

## What Is a Neutral Sleeping Position?

You should be able to fall asleep in one position and stay in the position the entire night if your body is in a supported neutral position. A neutral position is when your body weight is distributed over the greatest surface area and your spinal curves are supported. The only neutral position of the spine is sleeping on your back with a pillow under your neck.

Your arms are down by your side and your feet are out of the covers. Please see my video for a representation of this position. For more information on sleep you can visit [www.AtlantisWellness.com/sleep](http://www.AtlantisWellness.com/sleep).

## **How Do You Start Sleeping on Your Back?**

When you first start sleeping on your back it will NOT be comfortable and you will not stay on your back for the whole night. Just like working out for the first time, or doing a new activity, your body will be in pain as it adapts. Don't get frustrated and do not expect to succeed right away.

Our experience is that it takes an average of three to four months for some to convert from a side sleeper to a back sleeper, and even longer if you are converting from being a stomach sleeper. There are different techniques we give to our patients to use. You can visit [www.AtlantisWellness.com/sleep](http://www.AtlantisWellness.com/sleep) for more healthy sleeping tips.

### **Dr. Mercola's Comment**

I have known Peter for many years and he is always fun to be with. I was really impressed with his rationale for using this sleeping position and have personally been using it for a number of months and really enjoy it. I am not claiming that it is the only way to sleep, but encourage you to consider it and see if it works for you.

I do have three other comments that I think would help, though. The first is to recognize that a large percentage of the population has sleep apnea and if you are going to sleep on your back, this will likely worsen it. A solution for many, and one that I use myself, is to use paper tape over your mouth before you go to bed, thus forcing you to breathe through your nose and stop snoring.

The second, and perhaps most important, is probably one of the single most important things you can do for sleep, and that is to turn off ALL electricity to your room by going to the breaker box and shutting it off. You can have an electrician install a remote breaker for convenience, which is what I have done. This will virtually eliminate most electric fields in your bedroom.

This is important, as exposure to electric and magnetic fields during sleep can seriously impair your melatonin production and deep sleep. I used an expensive gigahertz electrical and magnetic meter to determine that the electrical fields in my bedroom decrease by 1,000 times when I shut off the electricity. It helps to use a battery operated talking clock so you can tell what time it is. I use one with a large button<sup>1</sup> that works really well for me.

Lastly, remember to block all blue light once the sun goes down. This includes not only your home lighting but the lighting from your devices, phones, tablets, computers and TVs.

## Sources and References

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- <sup>1</sup> [Amazon.com Talking Clock](#)