

IMPROVE YOUR SNOOZE

Sleep Aids versus Sleep Sappers

by Judith Fertig



Can eating a whole-wheat peanut butter cracker or sipping tart cherry juice help us sleep? Either is certainly worth a try, because most of us aren't getting enough shut-eye. According to the nonprofit National Sleep Foundation, 64 percent of America's adults frequently experience sleep problems; nearly half wake up at least once during the night. This deficit of restorative rest can affect our health.

"Lack of sleep can affect the immune system," says Dr. Timothy Morgenthaler, of the Mayo Clinic Sleep Disorders Center and an officer of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. "Studies show that people that don't get a good night's sleep or don't get enough sleep are more likely to get sick after being exposed to a virus, such as the common cold."

A concept called sleep hygiene refers to good health practices that promote sleep. For example: Is the room dark or quiet enough? Is the mattress comfortable? Have we allowed sufficient time to wind down after daily activities to become relaxed? What we eat or drink also can have a profound effect on getting a good night's rest.

Sleep Sappers

Physicians, naturopaths and nutritionists generally agree that these key factors delay or disrupt sleep.

Food and drink. According to Jamie Corroon, a naturopathic physician with Seattle's Bastyr University, eating or drinking too much during the day may make us less comfortable when settling down to sleep. Also, spicy foods may cause heartburn, which can lead to difficulty falling asleep and discomfort during the night.

Caffeine. "Caffeine's stimulant effect peaks in about one hour, and then declines as the liver breaks it down. So, if you go to bed by 11 p.m., you'll have to stop your caffeine intake by 2 or 3 p.m. to avoid insomnia," advises best-selling author Joy Bauer, a registered dietitian and nutritionist in New York City. She also cautions about energy drinks that incorporate herbal caffeine that may include guarana seeds, kola nuts and yerba mate leaves.

Nightcaps. Although many people think of alcohol as a sedative, it actually disrupts sleep, according to experts at the National Sleep Foundation.

Sleep Aids

What helps us sleep may be either a food's chemical properties or the psychological and physical comfort we associate with a certain food or drink. Options include some old reliables.

Walnuts and tart cherry juice. Studies conducted by the University of Texas Health Science Center, in San

Antonio, and published in the *Journal of Medicinal Food* found that these two foods are great sources of melatonin, a natural hormone that helps regulate sleep cycles. Tart cherry juice was found to be especially effective in reducing the time it took subjects to fall asleep.

Herbs. According to the Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Maryland, in Baltimore, some herbs have a mild, sedative effect. Three traditional herbs used for sleep are valerian, German chamomile and passionflower. The European practice of sipping a warm tisane, or herbal tea, made from these ingredients can be warming and soothing, preparing us to sleep. These herbs are also available as supplements.

Complex carbohydrates. “Enjoy a bedtime snack,” recommends Bauer, of about 200 calories or less; mainly complex carbohydrates, with a touch of protein, such as some banana with peanut butter, yogurt or a small amount of whole grain cereal with skim milk.

“By combining an ample dose of carbohydrates together with a small amount of protein—such as yogurt or turkey—containing the amino acid tryptophan, your brain produces serotonin, known as a calming hormone.”

A warm, milky drink. Research scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology concluded that the chemical properties of milk—mainly protein and tryptophan—were not enough to ensure a good night’s sleep (*American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*). However, sleep and wellness expert Anna de Vena, who writes for *SleepWellFeelGreat.com*, observes, “I love curling up with any kind of warm milky drink before bed, especially in the wintertime. There is a calming association with warm milk and sleep... from the time we were infants, when we drank milk and went to sleep.”

Judith Fertig celebrates healthy food at AlfrescoFoodAndLifestyle.blogspot.com.

SUGGESTED SLEEP SUPPLEMENTS

Both valerian and melatonin have good scientific evidence backing them up as natural sleep aids, advises Sharon Plank, an integrative medicine physician with the University of Pittsburgh Medical School’s Center for Integrative Medicine.

If the problem is falling asleep, the sedative effects of a valerian supplement can help. Because it has few adverse effects, it’s safe to try as a sleep aid, Plank says.

If the problem is disrupted sleep, melatonin can help, and comes in two forms—extended release and immediate release. Plank notes, “If you tend to wake up in the middle of the night, you may want to take extended release before you go to bed. If you have trouble falling asleep, try immediate release.”

If the problem is waking too early or restless leg syndrome, the problem could be a mineral deficiency. Studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture found that copper, iron and magnesium deficiencies caused sleep issues with some subjects; the studies specify recommended daily supplementation of copper (2 mg), iron (10 to 15 mg) and magnesium (400 mg).

