

Sleep Help through Better Nutrition

So many people look for sleep help through many avenues: getting a new mattress, going to bed at 10 p.m. every night, and using the bed only for sleeping. These are wonderful sleep help strategies, which are technically referred to as practicing good sleep hygiene.

But did you know that nutrition also plays a huge role in offering effective sleep help? In fact, adjusting nutrition may play an even bigger role in providing sleep help than purchasing a brand new mattress!



Nutritional sleep help is a two-pronged approach: what to eliminate from your diet, and what to add to your diet. There are several sleep help strategies within each.

Nutrition Sleep Help Strategy #1: Eliminate Caffeine

People think nothing of drinking coffee and soft drinks throughout the morning and afternoon. Yet completely eliminating caffeine from your diet is the best sleep help you could ever hope to get!

Caffeine is a powerful stimulant rivaled only by illegal drugs. Drinking six cups of coffee is the equivalent of downing one amphetamine, or 5 mg of dextroamphetamine.ⁱ Just one cup of coffee contains 110 mg of caffeine. Caffeine revs up the central nervous system, making it more difficult to fall asleep. You can have the most comfortable bed in the world, but caffeine will prevent you from falling asleep!

Caffeine's half life is three to five hours.ⁱⁱ That means that caffeine and its effects linger within your body for several hours after you consume it. Your mattress can be as cushiony as a dreamy cloud, but if you drink caffeine in the evening, it may take what seems like an eternity to fall asleep. Further, you may wake up frequently during the course of the night, tossing and turning in bed.

If you absolutely cannot live without caffeine—and you can—you should drink it before noon. For even better sleep help, you should limit your intake to two cups of coffee, which is approximately 200 mg of caffeine.ⁱⁱⁱ You should avoid consuming caffeine for a full eight hours before bed; your body needs several hours to completely eliminate the substance and its side effects.^{iv}

The reason that caffeine is of no sleep help is that it stimulates the body's stress response. In other words, it triggers production of the stress hormone adrenaline—the rush that fuels us with fight-or-flight power in the face of grave danger. This causes muscle tension, anxiety, irritability and insomnia. That is certainly no sleep help!

Another hormone that caffeine manipulates is melatonin. Unlike adrenalin, melatonin is actually a sleep-help hormone. The setting sun at dusk triggers the hypothalamus in the brain to tell the pineal gland, also in the brain, to stimulate melatonin. This sleep-help hormone is released in the body in increasing amounts between dusk and midnight to help us sleep.^{v vi} This sleep-help hormone also keeps us young; hence the term “beauty sleep!”

Caffeine also stresses out your adrenal glands. And when your adrenal glands are taxed to the max, it causes insomnia. These are two small thumb-sized glands, one perched atop each kidney. Not only do the adrenal glands manufacture adrenaline, but they determine your overall energy level. We’ll discuss the sleep help strategy of nutritionally supporting the adrenal glands shortly.

So eliminating caffeine from your diet is the number one sleep help strategy! Caffeine is not super addictive, so it’s easy to remove from your diet. It’s easiest to eliminate it gradually over the course of a week rather than going cold turkey. This will prevent withdrawal headaches and psychological mind games. Just drink one less caffeinated beverage per day until you’re at zero. Then say hello to sleeping soundly in bed!

Nutrition Sleep Help Strategy #2: Eliminate or Dramatically Reduce Alcohol

It’s true that drinking one glass of wine at dinner provides flavonoids that support the heart. The problem is, the sugars in alcohol disrupt sleep. It’s a myth that alcohol will provide sleep help benefits since it is technically classified as a depressant. The truth is, the way that your body metabolizes the sugars in alcohol disrupts sleep. This causes generally lighter sleep more frequent waking when you are in bed.

Further, alcoholic beverages can suppress certain stages of sleep—specifically, the crucial stages of deep sleep.^{vii} This provides zero sleep help whatsoever. Your body absolutely needs deep sleep for proper brain function, tissue repair, muscle building and immune system rejuvenation.

And here’s another sleep help tip: If you suffer from chronic snoring or sleep apnea, stay away from alcohol! It markedly worsens these conditions.^{viii}

Drinking alcohol will also likely make you have to get out of bed to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. So not only will your sleep be lighter in general, but it will almost certainly be interrupted.

So to make the most of your mattress time, try to limit yourself to just a couple drinks per week. Another sleep help tip is to drink any alcoholic beverages as early in the evening as possible, preferably with a meal.

Nutrition Sleep Help Strategy #3: Don’t Eat Too Late

Some people like to enjoy a snack just before bedtime. But even if it’s a sleep-help type of food, it will interfere with sleep if you eat within two hours of bedtime. We’ll discuss sleep-help snacks shortly. Your digestive system needs a couple of hours to completely metabolize food before you go to bed.

Another no-no that sabotages quality mattress time is the midnight snack! Like eating too close to bedtime, the metabolism process following a midnight snack will make your sleep lighter and cause more frequent awakenings when you are in bed.

In general, you should watch what and how much you eat in the evenings so that going to bed is restorative rather than fitful. If you eat a huge, late restaurant dinner of Four-Alarm Burritos, you'll feel miserable when you get horizontal in bed. You may also suffer from heartburn, which will prevent you from drifting off into dreamland.

Another sleep help tip is to avoid sugary sweets in the evenings between dinner and bed times. Blood sugar fluctuations instigate insomnia. Sugar is also related to irritability; a racing mind can make it near impossible to fall asleep once you get in bed. And if you awaken in the middle of the night, your sugar-fired brain will keep you awake.

Not only does eating too late interfere with quality mattress time, but so does drinking too late. Play it safe and stop all liquid intake for one hour before going to bed. This will prevent having to get out of bed in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. Another sleep help tip: urinate as many times as you can muster in the 30 minutes before going to bed!

Nutrition Sleep Help Strategy #4: Eat for Your Adrenals

Those little adrenal glands we discussed earlier also produce the stress hormone cortisol plus the youth hormone DHEA. Cortisol is beneficial—but only in the proper balance. Daily fluctuations in cortisol levels induce insomnia, which in turn churns out more cortisol, creating a vicious cycle that hampers quality mattress time.

Further, ample sleep in bed helps the adrenal glands produce sufficient DHEA levels, which keeps cortisol levels in their proper balance.

Symptoms indicating that those little sleep help glands are stressed out include:

- Experiencing difficulty try to fall asleep in bed, usually from worrying
- Feeling groggy when you wake up in the morning
- Finding it hard to peel yourself out of bed
- Needing caffeine to wake up for the morning
- Needing caffeine and sugar-loaded snacks to function, especially late in the morning and in the afternoon
- Craving sweets
- An inability to think clearly
- Impaired memory
- Frequent headaches
- Hypoglycemia
- Recurring infections
- Having low sex drive
- Feeling depressed^{ix}

Here's how you can get sleep help from your daily diet to support your adrenal glands:

- Indulge in a diet teeming with whole foods.
- Dramatically reduce the amount of refined sugar that you eat.
- Eat plenty of low-fat protein with each snack and meal, such as beans, hummus, tofu, seeds, nuts and fish.
- Avoid cleansing and fasting diets, which will fatigue the adrenals.
- Take 25 to 50 mg of a B complex vitamin every day.

- Take 500 to 1,000 mg daily of vitamin B-5, which is pantothenic acid. Divide it into smaller doses taken throughout the day. Snack times and mealtimes are convenient. Vitamin B-5 helps the adrenals produce energy.
- Take 500 to 2,000 mg of vitamin C. Like vitamin B-5, divide it into several doses taken throughout the day. Vitamin C supports the adrenal glands' blood vessels.
- Take 300 to 400 mg of magnesium every day. Again, divide the doses over the course of the day. You should take it in the form of citrate, fumarate, glycinate or malate.
- Take 15 to 30 mg of zinc every day.
- Take 100 mg Siberian ginseng two times every day. Take it before 3 p.m. so its energy-producing effects don't interfere with quality mattress time.

These sleep help tips will help your adrenals keep cortisol levels in perfect balance!

Nutrition Sleep Help Strategy #5: Take Mineral Supplements

Not only does magnesium provide adrenal help, but it also provides sleep help! If you don't get enough magnesium, you may sleep lighter and wake up more often when you're in bed.^x You may also experience full-blown insomnia if you have a magnesium deficiency.^{xi} We need 400 mg of magnesium every day. Taking a magnesium supplement can seriously improve the quantity and quality of your mattress time.^{xii} If you're experiencing muscle tension, you can take a magnesium supplement before bed to relax your muscles; this will impart more sound sleep.^{xiii}

You should note that some medications can prevent optimum magnesium absorption. This is most often diuretics that are used to treat high blood pressure. Also, you should consult your physician before taking magnesium if you have heart or kidney health issues.^{xiv}

Another sleep help mineral is copper. If you get less than 1 mg of copper in your daily diet, it may take you longer fall asleep when you go to bed; also, you may not feel well-rested the next day. But you will sleep better if you get 2 mg of copper every day. Foods high in copper include dried beans, seeds, nuts, mushrooms, lobster and cooked oysters.^{xv}

If you get less than one-third of the U.S. Recommended Daily Allowance of iron, another sleep help mineral, you may not sleep well. Women of menstruating age should get 15 mg of iron every day, while post-menopausal women and men should get 10 mg daily. This will help ensure sound sleep when you're in bed, with fewer awakenings and better overall sleep quality.^{xvi}

A multivitamin supplement that contains the above-listed amounts of these minerals can be a big sleep help!

Nutrition Sleep Help Strategy #6: Eat a Sleep-Beckoning Snack

Foods that contain tryptophan are the biggest sleep help. Tryptophan is an amino acid; the body converts it to melatonin and serotonin to beckon the sandman.^{xvii}

Tryptophan-containing sleep help foods include:

- Potatoes
- Bananas
- Dates
- Grains, especially oats
- Legumes
- Dairy products, preferably from organic and/or local dairy sources. They don't contain growth hormones, antibiotics or other stimulating chemicals. Yogurt and kefir, which is drinkable yogurt, are notably effective sleep help.^{xviii xix}

Other sleep help foods include:

- Lettuce
- Spinach
- Nuts, especially peanuts
- Poppy seeds^{xx xxi}

Enjoying a snack composed of these sleep help foods a couple of hours before bedtime will impart high-quality ZZZ's when you hit the mattress. If you eat any protein in your snack, such as nuts, be sure to eat more carbohydrates than protein. Protein contains tyrosine, a type of amino acid that activates the brain. This sleep help trick will make tryptophan more readily available to your brain so it can more easily produce melatonin and serotonin.

Nutrition Sleep Help Strategy #7: Enjoy a Healthy Diet

Here are some handy sleep help tips for your overall diet:

- Follow a regular meal schedule. Eating on a sporadic schedule can be detrimental to sleep patterns when you go to bed.
- Avoid dieting. Dieting causes cortisol levels to fluctuate, setting the stage for insomnia.
- Eat a healthy diet that is high in whole foods and low in refined sugar.

These sleep help tips will help you get the most out of your mattress mileage. Who knew that sleep help could taste so great?

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