

# SLEEP AND FOOD

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In addition to giving us nourishment, the things we eat and drink can help us get a better night's sleep. Knowing how food and drink affect the body, can help keep you alert during the day and reduce the chance of a sleepless night.

## Eat to Sleep

Certain foods contain an amino acid called tryptophan that can promote relaxation after they are digested. Dairy foods contain tryptophan, as well as nuts and seeds, oats, bananas and eggs. Foods rich in calcium (dairy foods, sesame seeds, green leafy veg) and magnesium (green leafy veg, nuts and seeds, fish, soybeans, bananas) also assist sleep.

Proteins from these foods are the building blocks of tryptophan. Carbohydrates make tryptophan more available to the brain to help its absorption. Therefore the best light bedtime snack is one that contains both a carbohydrate and a protein, such as a small bowl of cereal with milk or a slice of peanut butter on toast. However, keep the snack small as a heavy meal will tax your digestive system, making you uncomfortable and unable to get good sleep.

To reduce disturbed sleep, try to avoid heavy, fatty, spicy and protein rich meals before bed as these make your digestive system work harder making it more difficult to fall asleep.

High protein foods or foods rich in an amino acid called tyramine have been shown to cause waking effects. Foods such as pork, cheese, chocolate, aubergines, tomatoes and potatoes near bedtime are best avoided as they are rich in tyramine, which the body converts to noradrenaline, a brain stimulant.

## Drink to Sleep

Caffeine is a stimulant that works by blocking the action of hormones in the brain that make us feel sleepy. A strong dose of caffeine can stimulate the mind for a short time, although this is not a recommended method for long term sleepiness management. It is suggested that caffeinated beverages are not drunk six hours before sleep, as the effect of caffeine can persist for several hours, potentially disrupting sleep. Perhaps try an herbal or fruit tea such as camomile, passion flower or valerian instead. It is worth noting that some green tea's also contain caffeine.

Energy drinks may also sound appealing to keep you going through the day but rather than boosting your energy they can increase sleepiness after the initial short lived energy effects. The extra sugar and stimulants within these drinks cause a drowsy slump after the initial wakeful period. There are also many other negative impacts of an increased sugar intake, such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, tooth decay and diabetes.

Beer, wine, or other alcoholic beverages are also perceived to be popular to aid sleeping. However, alcohol is a poor sleep aid. It may help you to relax and fall asleep in the short term, but it can disrupt sleep over the course of the night. It also keeps you from entering the deeper stages of sleep, which may cause you to wake up still feeling tired despite having spent an adequate amount of time in bed.

Suggested meals:

- Wake up breakfast – eggs on toast or porridge with nuts, seeds or berries and a small glass of fresh juice.
- Wind down dinner – eat foods like dark green leafy veg (spinach, kale), nuts, seeds (pumpkin), fish (mackerel, tuna, turbot), beans or lentils, whole grains (brown rice), avocados, yogurt, bananas – these can all assist sleep due to their calcium and magnesium content. Allow at least 2 hours after eating before going to sleep.

You should contact your Employee Assistance Programme or Health Practitioner if poor sleep or sleep disturbance an issue for you.