

Eat right, sleep tight

Lack of sleep is a common health complaint, with only one in 10 of us saying we always sleep well. What you eat can help you sleep better, as nutritionist **Fiona Hunter** explains

If you spent last night tossing and turning, the chances are that today you're feeling jaded, irritable and not as productive as usual. Studies have also found a relationship between the quantity and quality of sleep and health problems, such as the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and depression. Lack of sleep is also believed to suppress the immune system, leaving you vulnerable to infections.

Although seven hours is usually cited as the amount of sleep we need, there is no magic number. We tend to need slightly less sleep as we age, but sleep needs are also individual. You may function best on seven hours a night, while someone else may need nine or as few as four hours to lead a happy, productive life.



Get a better night's sleep

WHAT TO AVOID...

- Say no to an after-dinner espresso or late night cuppa. The stimulant effect of caffeine reaches its peak one to four hours after it is consumed, but some people can feel its effects up to 12 hours later. Some over-the-counter cold and headache remedies are also high in caffeine.
- A large late evening meal can interfere with sleep quality by causing the stomach to produce acid, resulting in heartburn and indigestion. Try to eat at least three hours before going to bed.
- Exercise produces stimulants that stop the brain from relaxing quickly – so keep exercise sessions to earlier in the day. Generally, regular exercise can help promote better sleep.
- Don't take supplements just before bed. Some of the B vitamins can make it more difficult to drop off.
- Eating a high-protein meal without carbohydrates may keep you awake, since protein-rich foods contain the amino acid tyrosine, which perks up the brain.
- Although a couple of drinks may make you feel drowsy and help you drift off to sleep, too much alcohol causes blood sugar levels to drop, so you may wake up in the middle of the night.
- Nicotine is a stimulant, so smokers take longer to fall asleep, wake up more often and are more likely to suffer sleep problems. Getting a better night's sleep is just one more reason to quit smoking!

FOODS THAT AID SLEEP

- Yogurt
 - Milk
 - Cheese
 - Oats
 - Bananas
 - Poultry
 - Peanuts
 - Eggs
 - Tuna fish
- These all contain good amounts of the sleep-inducing amino-acid, tryptophan.

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WHAT TO TRY...

- Drinking a glass of warm milk before bed will help you sleep better – it's not just an old wives' tale. Dairy products are rich in the amino acid tryptophan, and calcium, both of which help boost levels of sleep-inducing substances serotonin and melatonin.
- Eating a carbohydrate-rich snack, like a slice of toast or a bowl of cereal, an hour or so before going to bed stimulates the release of insulin, which helps clear amino acids that compete with tryptophan from the bloodstream, allowing more of this sleep-inducing amino acid to enter the brain.
- Herbal teas with a sedative effect include camomile, orange or lime blossom.
- Try a relaxing routine before bed, like a warm bath or some gentle yoga or stretching. Establish a regular bedtime and waking-up schedule as this helps set your body clock to these times.
- Some research links low calcium intake with sleep problems. Dairy products are the best source of calcium and if you don't eat at least three servings of dairy products a day, you may be lacking in calcium, so it could be worth taking a supplement.
- If you suffer from Restless Legs Syndrome – a constant urge to move the legs often accompanied by a tingling sensation – you may be short of iron, according to scientists from the Sleep Disorder Unit at the New England Medical Center. Other studies suggest vitamin E supplements can help.
- Make sure your bedroom is a calm environment, neither too hot or cold. A dab of lavender oil on your pillow will also help you to relax.

