

Nutrition Tidbits

A Monthly Newsletter for patients at
Family Medical Center at North
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Foods that Help Sleep

While there are foods that negatively impact our sleep, there are also foods and food patterns that can help us. They include:

- Dairy products contain natural amounts of melatonin and tryptophan, a precursor to serotonin.
- Other high tryptophan foods include nuts, eggs, oats, poultry and red meat
- Complex carbohydrates deliver energy slowly to the body, allowing blood sugar levels to remain constant. Foods such as whole grain breads, cereals and crackers are good choices.
- Eating a small amount (<250 calories) of the foods mentioned prior to falling asleep above can help the quality of your sleep. Avoid large meals of any kind within 3 hours of sleeping for this purpose.



Sweet Dreams

Another great reason to follow a healthy lifestyle is to promote healthy sleep cycles in your life. Sleep deprivation can cause many health problems. In addition to proper nutrition, regular exercise is highly recommended to maximize the quality of your sleep. Research shows that people involved in regular physical activity stay in the deepest sleep cycle for longer periods. This assists in keeping your immune system strong and waking up well-rested. We are entering the Holiday Season where we have a tendency to be more stressed and feel less rested. Let us all use this newsletter as a reminder to stay consistent on our healthy eating and physical activity regimens so we can maximize good times with friends and family. That's what this season is all about! Be sure to check out our November 2008 issue online if you are looking for tips on healthy eating strategies for the Holidays. From all of us here at PNT, **Happy Thanksgiving!**

The Food-Sleep Connection

Over 70 million Americans are currently suffering from some type of sleep disorder and 60% of those people have chronic issues. The foods you eat can have a mild to moderate impact on the quality of your sleep.

Let's face it. We do not function well when sleep deprived. Our decision making processes are impaired, our perspective on daily issues get skewed and frankly, we're not that fun to be around. Our quality of life goes severely down, not to mention the negative long term impact it has on our health. Sleep is such a fundamental need for the human body, yet many of us are not even getting the recommended 7-9 hours that we need. Have you ever wondered whether or not the foods you are eating or your food patterns are affecting your sleep? They can be! Food has the power to positively or negatively influence sleep. We will discuss some of the ways along with suggestions to assist you in getting the sleep you need.

Overconsumption

Overconsumption of foods at a single meal, particularly late night

meals, can cause disruption in sleep due to indigestion. Your body has to digest that large meal while you are lying down. The supine position is not the optimal position for your body to be in during this process. Not only can reflux of foods occur, but imagine the pressure that is put on your gut if you are lying on your side or on your stomach. Consider eating dinner at least 3 hours before bedtime to avoid this from happening.

Obesity may contribute to a couple of things that can impact sleep. The research on obesity and its negative psychological effects generally falls into two categories. The first examines the psychosocial reasons for depression in the obese; the second looks for neurochemical or genetic connections in the body that link obesity with depression. When a person is depressed, often times they will go through altering periods of oversleeping and insomnia.

Overweight and obese people can suffer from a condition called obstructive sleep apnea. Sleep apnea is a common disorder in which you have one or more pauses in

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Fig 1. The Sleep-Stress/Depression-Food cycle for some people

breathing or shallow breaths while you sleep. This results in poor sleep quality that makes you tired during the day. Sleep apnea is one of the leading causes of excessive daytime sleepiness. Although sleep apnea can occur in anyone, people that are overweight are more prone to this disorder because extra adipose tissue surrounding the airways putting pressure and temporarily blocking air while you sleep. Untreated sleep apnea can lead to many serious health issues. If someone has sleep apnea that is not already overweight, it can also contribute to a higher body weight due to sleep deprivation causing increased hunger. In addition to important medical treatments, another important treatment is weight loss through healthy lifestyle changes.

As you can see, carrying extra weight can put a person in a continuous unproductive cycle (Fig. 1). As sleep decreases, stress and/or depression and food intake may increase. It can also go the other way – as food or stress and/or depression increases, sleep may decrease. That is why it is important to deal with both emotional eating and stress or depression in order to maximize the quality of your sleep and rest. Challenge yourself to get out of that cycle by getting assistance from a Registered Dietitian (RD) to assist with food patterns and if needed, a licensed professional counselor to assist with stress management and/or depression.

Stimulating Food and Drink

About 80-90% of adults in America report regular caffeine use. The average intake is somewhere in the range of 200-280mg per day. As you know, the average tells us that there are people well above that number and well below. Research shows that a moderate intake of caffeine - up to 300mg per day – is safe for most adults. However, the timing of caffeine is important to consider when it comes to sleep. Caffeine stays in the bloodstream for about 4-6 hours, so even if you are not one of those people that have trouble falling asleep after drinking caffeine, chances are the sleep that you are having is not the best in quality.

As a reminder, chocolate does contain caffeine (~9mg per 1.5 oz milk chocolate, 31mg for the same amount of dark chocolate). Not only are foods with chocolate caffeine-containing, they also have a tendency to have high sugar content. Sugary foods have a stimulating effect as well. Sugar can temporarily stimulate your body and then drop blood sugar levels, which can cause you to wake up after having fallen asleep. Alcohol can do that as well. It may initially help you fall asleep, but then it will cause you to wake up prior to a full night's sleep. Spicy foods and foods high in monosodium glutamate (MSG) are sometimes reported as stimulants in some people. Instead, gravitate towards foods that help relax and calm you (see *Foods That Help You Sleep*).

Food Types

Fatty foods, spearmint, peppermint, chocolate, citrus foods and other acidic foods create more hydrochloric acid (HCl) in your stomach. These can cause an increase in reflux while lying down, so avoid these 3 hours prior to hitting the hay. As you can see, foods can impact your sleep every night. Think before you eat!

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