

The Sleep/Nutrition Connection



What we eat and when we eat it can determine how quickly we fall asleep and how well we sleep. Research shows people who don't get enough sleep are more likely to eat more because their appetite-regulating hormones dip, increasing their appetite. This can trigger a destructive cycle of relying on caffeine, fatty foods and sugar to get through energy slumps caused by sleep deprivation.

Time to get smart on how nutrition, health and sleep are interrelated.

PRACTICES

 **EAT NUTRITIOUS FOODS, MORE FREQUENTLY.** Food is related to sleep by food choices, appetite and metabolism. Eat balanced, nutritious meals and snacks frequently throughout the day, starting with a healthy breakfast. Select foods with a low glycemic index (eggs, meats, poultry, fish and vegetables) and eat regularly throughout the day, to avoid rising cortisol levels (and binge eating) at nighttime.

 **SAY "NO" TO EVENING CAFFEINE, SUGAR & ALCOHOL.** It takes the body six hours to metabolize caffeine, so for most people it's best to avoid caffeine after lunchtime (this includes chocolate – ouch). Alcohol. While it can make you drowsy at first, it significantly impairs your sleep cycles later in the night (especially reducing restorative REM sleep) as your body works to metabolize the alcohol. Finally, sugar gives you a temporary energy boost, so it's best to avoid it before bed.

Cortisol is released in the body at the highest levels in the morning and lowest levels at night, in a 24-hour circadian rhythm cycle. High levels of nighttime cortisol production awaken the body and mind and disrupt [REM sleep](#), meaning you could wake up non-refreshed, no matter how many hours of sleep you get.

 **AVOID INDIGESTION-CAUSING FOODS.** Large, protein-heavy meals keep us awake because they take longer to digest, which can be uncomfortable. Avoid high-fat foods, peppers and spicy food later in the evening as well, which can also cause heartburn and indigestion.

 **SNACK SMART.** Food requires time and energy to digest. So while it's ideal to avoid snacking at night, there *are* smart snacking choices:

- **Banana smoothie** – Ideal for the light protein in the milk with potassium in the banana. If your body is low in calcium you may have trouble falling sleep. Calcium reduces stress and stabilizes nerve fibers. And potassium helps muscles relax.
- **Whole grain crackers or bread with almond butter** – This has a good protein/carb ratio, with bonus points for the magnesium in the nut butter, which promotes sleep and muscle relaxation.
- **Full-fat Greek yogurt with cherries** – Excellent choice for the light protein in the yogurt with a dose of melatonin and tryptophan in the cherries.
- **Butternut squash soup** – Warm foods are calming foods, and this option has both good carbs and nutrients in the squash.
- **Rice cake with cottage cheese or Pistachios and a string cheese** – Both offer the ideal carb/protein combo, with calcium and tryptophan.