



# Foods for Sleep

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The uncertainty of the past several months has challenged our ability to obtain a good night’s sleep. We know that sleep is an important contributor to overall health and well-being but getting enough quality sleep is another matter. For many of us with “sleep debt”, we’ve forgotten what being truly rested feels like.

The National Sleep Foundation released the results of a world-class study that took more than two years of research to complete. In the text box, you can find the updated guidelines on how much sleep you really need at each age. The new chart features minimum and maximum ranges for health as well as “recommended” windows and identifies the “rule-of-thumb” amounts experts agree upon.

<b>Newborns (0-3 months):</b> Sleep range narrowed to 14-17 hours each day	(previously it was 12-18)
<b>Infants (4-11 months):</b> Sleep range widened two hours to 12-15 hours	(previously it was 14-15)
<b>Toddlers (1-2 years):</b> Sleep range widened by one hour to 11-14 hours	(previously it was 12-14)
<b>Preschoolers (3-5):</b> Sleep range widened by one hour to 10-13 hours	(previously it was 11-13)
<b>School age children (6-13):</b> Sleep range widened by one hour to 9-11 hours	(previously it was 10-11)
<b>Teenagers (14-17):</b> Sleep range widened by one hour to 8-10 hours	(previously it was 8.5-9.5)
<b>Younger adults (18-25):</b> Sleep range is 7-9 hours	(new age category)
<b>Adults (26-64):</b> Sleep range did not change and remains 7-9 hours	
<b>Older adults (65+):</b> Sleep range is 7-8 hours	(new age category)

Sleep needs vary with age and are influenced by lifestyle and health. It is important to examine what lifestyle factors are affecting the quality and quantity of your sleep such as work schedules, stress, activity, and even the foods we eat. Heavy meals, eating too late at night, spicy foods, too much caffeine, and alcohol can interfere with sleep. The stimulating effects of caffeine are highly individual. A recent study showed that 400 mg of caffeine (the amount in four 8 oz. cups of brewed coffee) taken 0, 3 or 6 hours before bedtime significantly disrupts sleep. Even at 6 hours, caffeine reduced sleep by more than 1 hour. Over successive nights this can interfere with daytime functioning. Check out this caffeine [chart](#) to find out how much caffeine is in the foods and beverages you commonly consume.

While drinking alcohol can have an initial sedative effect, research shows that as alcohol levels decrease in the blood, the sleepiness effect wears off, and we wake up. Also, alcohol stimulates our kidneys causing us to take frequent trips to the bathroom. The effects of drinking alcohol too close to bedtime can result in interrupted sleep which is not restful or restorative. Experts advise not to consume alcohol within 2 hours of bedtime and if you drink, to adhere to these recommendations:

- 1 serving a day for women
- 2 servings a day for men
- 1 serving = 5 ounces of wine, 12 ounces of beer, and 1.5 ounces of hard liquor.

Eating food too close to bedtime or eating too much can also interfere with sleep. Digesting food is an energy producing task for the body. Blood is shunted to our stomachs and intestines to digest food and absorb nutrients. This activity raises our metabolic rate making it difficult for the body to rest and enter a phase of sleepiness. It is recommended not to eat or drink anything, other than water, within 2 hours of going to bed.

The effects of exercise on sleep are highly individual. Most people will sleep better during the night after a physically active day. But for some people, activity too close to bedtime can make it difficult to fall asleep. The 2 - hour window of no physical activity close to going to sleep can be helpful for some. Other people can exercise at night and fall off to sleep easily. It may take some trial and error to see what exercise schedule works best for you.

In addition to these general nutritional and activity guidelines for restful sleep, certain foods can initiate sleep. These are foods that contain natural sources of serotonin or melatonin. Serotonin is converted in the body to melatonin, known as the “sleep hormone”. When melatonin levels rise, our bodies are triggered to sleep. Serotonin is made from tryptophan, an amino acid found in protein foods, but can only be absorbed when in the presence of carbohydrates, preferably whole grain sources. Therefore, tryptophan plus carbohydrate makes serotonin which makes melatonin.

**Tryptophan + Carbohydrate -> Serotonin -> Melatonin**

Also, certain minerals, like calming calcium and magnesium, and some herbs that have a relaxing effect like chamomile can put you in a sleepy state.



**If you want a night of sound sleep, consider having a light, sleep-inducing snack about an hour before bedtime.**

**Good choices include:**

- **Half a Banana and a Handful of Almonds:** The combination of tryptophan in the almonds, carbohydrate from the banana, and calming magnesium can help make you drowsy.
- **Whole-Grain Crackers with Peanut Butter:** Is another magical combo (tryptophan from peanuts + complex carbohydrates from whole grain crackers) that can promote sound sleep. Stick to approximately 5 crackers and 1 tablespoon of peanut butter.
- **A Mug of Warm Milk:** Mom was right—drinking warm milk before bedtime can help you sleep better, thanks to the tryptophan, calcium, and magnesium found in milk. Also, milk contains lactose, the naturally occurring carbohydrate found in milk and dairy products. Just make sure it's a small mug and not a huge glass, or else you'll be running to the bathroom all night.
- **A Small Bowl of Whole-Grain Cereal with Milk:** The milk's tryptophan, calcium, and magnesium, coupled with the cereal's calming carbs and magnesium can help you feel sleepy. Choose a low-sugar cereal, such as plain Cheerios, so you don't get a spike in blood sugar that could perk you up. Another idea is to make hot oatmeal with milk, because oatmeal is a natural source of sleep-promoting melatonin. Start with ½ cup of uncooked oatmeal. Steel cut oatmeal contains more fiber!
- **Half a Turkey Sandwich:** Make it with whole-wheat bread (rich in complex carbs and magnesium) and a couple of slices of turkey (the most famous source of tryptophan). Turkey alone doesn't do it, you must include a small amount of healthy carbohydrate in order to get the sleep promoting qualities of turkey. Also, tryptophan supplements are not as effective as the naturally occurring tryptophan found in foods.
- **Tart Cherry Juice:** Is a natural source of melatonin but it must be tart, not sweet red cherries! A 4-6 oz. small glass of juice should do the trick. Tart cherry juice can now be found in most local grocery stores. It can be pricey but effective!
- **Pumpkin Seeds:** Also known as pepitas, contain lots of tryptophan as well as a good amount of zinc, both of which are important precursors to serotonin, and therefore, melatonin. Recommended serving size is ¼ cup. An added benefit is that kids love these!
- **A Small Mug of Herbal Tea:** Chamomile, passionflower, spearmint, lemon balm, and valerian teas each have a sedating effect. Add a teaspoon of honey to boost serotonin. Avoid ginseng tea as it can be stimulating.

Be sure to keep your bedtime snack on the light side. The last thing you want to do is overload your stomach and set yourself up for a night of interrupted sleep, or to consume extra calories in an effort to lull yourself to sleep.