

Eating, Drinking and... Sleeping

By Bill Bradley, Registered Dietitian and Cookbook Author

You are far from alone when you are awake in the middle of the night trying to get back to sleep. According to the National Sleep Foundation, almost half of Americans are getting “poor or insufficient” sleep during a typical week. Prolonged lack of sleep results in many effects from impaired brain activity to depression, weight gain, high blood pressure, heart disease, and a weakened immune system. And, in the short term, most people with chronic sleep problems feel run down and exhausted with a general lack of motivation.

Exhaustion during the day often causes consumption of foods and drinks that actually contribute to even further poor sleep. For example, a small amount of caffeine in the early part of the day doesn’t appear to impact sleep for most people. A cup or two of coffee or green tea before 2 p.m. is a great way to get a mental boost, but if you are drinking 3, 4, 5 or more cups of coffee throughout the day or consuming caffeine in the evening, chances are you will have a hard time sleeping. When you consume foods such as dark chocolate, caffeinated sodas and energy drinks should also be monitored carefully.

When we get home at night we want to relax and unwind from a busy day. Drinking alcohol is a common way people relax. Many people unknowingly drink alcohol assuming this will help them sleep because alcohol is a depressant. It is true that alcohol can help us fall asleep, but it often leads to overall disturbed sleep and an increased risk of snoring. Just like caffeine, a small amount is probably fine, but you want to drink alcohol earlier in the evening, not right before going to bed.

One tell tale sign of whether you will have a good night's sleep or not is how your body feels when you go to bed. If you get into bed with indigestion or heart burn your sleep will almost certainly be disturbed. If this applies to you, it is important examine the food you have been eating. Did you have spicy, fatty or sugary foods? I know that if I eat a lot of processed foods then my body is not going to be happy and I am probably not going to sleep well. One of the best ways to learn how certain foods affect your sleep is to keep a food/sleep journal for a week. Each day, write down what you eat and when and then keep track of how many hours you slept, if you slept through the night, tossed and turned, etc. Do you sleep better when you don't snack late at night? Does a cup of herbal tea at night help your relax? Foods and drinks can affect people differently, so keeping the journal is a really nice tool to learn about your own patterns. For example, I do know friends who drink coffee all day and into the evening and sleep better than others who abstain from drinking coffee. Of course I don't recommend that, I am just pointing out that what works for one person might not work for someone else.

Finally, what should we eat for better sleep? Well, this can also differ from person to person, but the general answer is: a healthy, plant based, Mediterranean or Asian style diet. Focus on whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, small amounts of meat, chicken and fish. Bananas contain tryptophan, magnesium, and potassium all of which can help with relaxation. Almonds, cherries, oatmeal and non-caffeinated tea can all help you relax and sleep better. Refrain from eating large amounts of food close to bedtime. The bottom line is, the better your body feels, the more likely you will get a good night's sleep. Overall, eat and drink what you find makes your body feel good, gives you sustained energy and your body will reward you with energy during the day and a restful slumber at night. Don't forget to be physically active! Regular physical activity will also help you sleep better!

Sleep well!

