GET A BETTER NIGHT'S SLEEP

Getting enough rest has countless health benefits, but it doesn't come easily to everyone, especially with the lengthening days. Here are a few ways to help you successfully hit the snooze button

Words Anita Bean

Did you lie awake counting sheep last night? You're not alone. According to a 2022 YouGov survey, nearly half of us say we don't get enough sleep. This is bad news considering that a good night's sleep is probably the simplest, most affordable way to improve our health. Sleep not only reduces fatigue but also supports our immunity, boosts wellbeing, helps maintain a healthy weight and even cuts the risk of serious health conditions, including heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

As well as affecting your mood, a lack of rest can disrupt hunger and fullness hormones. A study published in the journal *Obesity* showed that people who slept for only four and a half hours per night for four consecutive nights consumed 340 more calories a day, mostly from extra snacks, than those who got eight and a half hours' sleep. Most of us need between seven and nine hours per night, but the ideal amount varies – the key is to get enough to function normally and not feel sleepy the next day.

There are many things you can do throughout the day to improve how you sleep at night, from exercising to getting outside in the natural light – but something you may not have considered is timing. According to the results of a study published in the *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, the time at which you have your evening meal can affect both your sleep quality and duration. "Eating too close to bedtime is likely to result in a disrupted night's sleep," says Dr Neil Stanley, independent sleep expert and author of *How to Sleep Well*. "Your body needs to lower its core temperature by 1ºC in order to sleep, and if it's processing food, then you won't lose that body heat. Ideally, you should plan to eat at least two or three hours before bedtime, allowing your body time to digest your food properly."

It's also about your own personal body clock. "Aligning your eating with your circadian rhythm, or body clock, improves the way the body metabolises your food and leads to better sleep," explains Neil. "The key is to set an ideal

'A DIET WITH TOO MANY REFINED CARBS AND TOO MUCH ADDED SUGAR WILL HAMPER YOUR SLEEP QUALITY'

window for regular mealtimes and avoid late-night eating." Researchers at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in California found that when people ate within a 12-hour window, they reported feeling less hungry, more energetic and sleeping better.

What about alcohol? While a drink or two can make you feel relaxed and help you fall asleep more quickly, it has a negative impact on the quality and duration of sleep. "Alcohol interferes with your sleep cycles and inhibits deep sleep, plus you're more likely to wake up needing to go to the loo," says Neil.

Caffeine is another factor. While it can make you feel more alert during the day, it can also make it more difficult to sleep well at night. Caffeine's half-life (the time required for half of the caffeine to be eliminated from the body) varies from person to person, but the average is about five hours. Experts typically recommend avoiding caffeine at least eight hours before bedtime, but again, it's personal. "What's important is to figure out how long before bed you personally should stop consuming caffeine. If you move your last cup of coffee to 3pm but are still having restless nights, you may need to push that back even further," suggests Neil.

You may have heard that protein-rich foods, such as milk, chicken or turkey, will give you a better night's sleep, but there is no evidence to support this claim. "The main reason people think these foods promote sleep is because they contain tryptophan," says Neil. "Tryptophan is an amino acid that increases the production of melatonin, the hormone that promotes sleep. But these foods contain too little to have an effect on you." Likewise, it's a myth that eating cheese before sleep gives you nightmares. But if having a milky drink is part of your bedtime routine and you feel that it helps you unwind, then go for it.

While tryptophan won't help your sleep, a diet containing too many refined carbs and added sugar will hamper it, according to Columbia University researchers. Their study tracked the diets and sleep quality of more than 50,000 post-menopausal women for a study in *The American* »

5 NUTRITION TIPS TO HELP YOU GET MORE SLEEP

TIMING COUNTS Avoid eating large meals just before bedtime. A light snack is fine if you feel hungry, but a big meal can disrupt your sleep.

GO EASY ON PROCESSED SUGARY FOODS that can cause blood sugar spikes and dips.

LIMIT CAFFEINE after lunch to give your body time to wind down before bedtime.

AVOID TOO MUCH ALCOHOL, which reduces sleep quality and may affect how you feel the next day.

EAT MORE FIBRE A diet with plenty of fruit, vegetables, legumes and wholegrains has been shown to help you sleep better at night.

Journal of Clinical Nutrition. The more sugar, white rice, white bread and sugary drinks consumed by the women in the study, the higher the risk of insomnia.

Why? One explanation is the effect these foods have on blood sugar levels, which rise sharply when refined and sugary foods are consumed, only to drop again when insulin is released. This process simultaneously stimulates hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol – both of which can interfere with sleep.

Eating the right things, however, could help you get more shuteye. According to a study published in the journal *Nutrients,* people who adhered to a Mediterranean diet, rich in vegetables, pulses, olive oil and fish, were much more likely to sleep well compared to those who did not. While there are no magical foods that will aid sleep, there are some tried and tested things you can do for a better night's rest. These include developing a consistent bedtime routine, creating a good sleeping environment, being physically active during the day, keeping to a consistent sleep schedule, avoiding eating late at night, and not consuming too much alcohol and caffeine. Do all that and, hopefully, sweet dreams will await.

Health writer Anita Bean is a registered nutritionist specialising in sports nutrition. She has worked with the London Marathon and is the author of The Vegan Athlete's Cookbook *and* The Runner's Cookbook.

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