Nutrition, Meals and Sleep

Changing your eating and drinking habits may help your sleep.

Adults need seven to eight hours of sleep per night, but most people sleep less than seven hours. In fact, more than one third of Americans have reported that sleep deprivation interferes with their work and social life at least a few days each month. However, lack of quality sleep will hurt more than your social life — studies show that not getting enough sleep on a regular basis increases the risk of high blood pressure, heart disease and other medical conditions.

Fortunately, there are several ways to help improve the quality of your sleep, including changing your eating and drinking habits. Making these small changes can help you make the most of your shut-eye:

1. **Eat well for improved energy.** Eating a balanced diet can lead to improved energy during the day and contribute to healthy sleep cycles. A nutritious eating plan includes:
   - Increasing your fruit and vegetable intake, especially dark green, red and orange vegetables
   - Consuming more whole grains, as well as fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products
   - Choosing a variety of proteins, including seafood, lean meat and poultry, eggs, beans and unsalted nuts
2 Don’t eat big meals late at night. Avoid rich, heavy, spicy or acidic foods within two hours of bedtime. People with esophageal reflux may be advised to remain upright for two to three hours after eating.
   • High-fat foods take a lot of work for your stomach to digest and that may keep you up.
   • Spicy or acidic foods may cause stomach trouble and heartburn, especially while laying down in bed.

3 Cut down on caffeine. Food or beverage with caffeine may disturb some people’s sleep. Caffeinated teas, coffee and some sodas block cell receptors that are used to trigger sleep-inducing signals, fooling the body into thinking it isn’t tired.
   • Caffeine can take up to eight hours to wear off completely. If you are sensitive, limit eating food or drink with caffeine after late afternoon.
   • Some medicines, including some pain relievers, contain caffeine as well.

4 Avoid alcohol before bed, if you choose to drink at all. Small amounts of alcohol may be relaxing and help you fall asleep, but it actually interferes with staying asleep.

5 Avoid drinking fluids too close to bedtime. If the need to urinate wakes you up in the middle of the night, limit liquids before bedtime.

6 Quit smoking. The nicotine in cigarettes is a stimulant that may keep you awake and lead to lighter sleep overall. Heavy smokers also tend to wake up too early because of nicotine withdrawal.

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Get a Boost by Eating Breakfast

Do you skip breakfast regularly? If so, you may be missing out on some big health benefits.

A breakfast full of nutrients is a great way to get your day started. It can also provide the boost you need to fuel your day.

Benefits of breakfast

Studies show that eating breakfast has been associated with a number of health benefits, including weight loss, when needed. Breakfast has also been linked with improved nutrition. Skipping breakfast has been associated with excess weight, especially with children and adolescents.

Compared with children who ate breakfast, kids who skipped breakfast reported feeling more tired during the morning. Also, a good breakfast has been tied to reduced absenteeism and improved learning and mood.

Eating breakfast may help prevent you from overeating later in the day. Nearly four out of five people who have successfully lost weight and kept it off eat breakfast every day.

Other research shows that eating breakfast can help reduce both obesity and the chance of developing type 2 diabetes. Breakfast eaters were also less likely to develop heart disease.

Breakfast ideas

Here are some tips on choosing a nutritious breakfast:

- **Protein.** An egg is one option. Other choices include a slice of lean meat, low-fat cheese and yogurt. Or, try peanut butter on toast.

- **Whole grains.** Experts advise consuming half of our grains from whole grains. For many people, this is easy at breakfast because of choices like oatmeal. Or you can try whole-grain breads or pancakes. Studies show that whole grains are nutritious and reduce your risk of diabetes and heart disease.

- **Top off with fruit and vegetables.** Without added sugar, fruit and vegetables are high in nutrients and low in calories. Yet, most Americans do not eat their recommended allowance. Breakfast is a good place to start. Choices might include bananas, oranges, grapefruit, mangoes, apples or berries. Another option is chopping up some onions, tomatoes or other vegetables for your omelet or scrambled eggs.

No excuses necessary

Have an excuse for skipping breakfast? See if these tips can help.

- **Can’t fix a good breakfast when you’re running out the door?** Try waking up 10 minutes earlier. That’s plenty of time to eat a bowl of whole-grain cereal or make a quick health shake.

- **Keep it simple.** A slice of whole grain toast with peanut or almond butter and a banana is all you need to get started.

- **Breakfast on the move.** Good to-go items include whole-grain crackers, unsalted nuts, fruit or a peanut butter sandwich.

**Sources:**


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The word “snack” may conjure up images of cookies, chips and even candy. But snack food doesn’t have to mean food you should feel guilty about eating. Well-planned snacks can be a vital part of a meal plan, especially for growing children.

At the same time, don’t let your child snack on candy or cookies to make up for a meal they didn’t finish. Make sure you offer snacks that contribute to their nutritional needs.

Think about snacks as nutritious, planned mini-meals and not just junk food. Most growing children need more quality nutrients than they normally eat during a day’s worth of meals. And unless you’re eating three very well-balanced meals, snacks can give an extra daily nutrition boost to adults, too. Here are some ideas from the Department of Agriculture’s Choose My Plate website.

**Plan ahead**

It is difficult for preschoolers in particular to get all of the nutrition they need from just three meals. Plan daily menus that include one or two snacks as part of the daily menu and be prepared to offer small, healthy snacks if your child is hungry at other times.

It’s important to allow children to recognize when they are hungry or full.

**Hit the food groups**

Try to offer snacks that include at least two food groups, such as apple slices with cheese, a mini-bagel or whole-grain bread with peanut butter, yogurt topped with diced fruit or berries or graham crackers to dip in yogurt. Low-fat string cheese or cottage cheese are good options, too.

In general, the dietary guidelines that apply to adults apply to kids. So try to incorporate more vegetables, fruits, whole grains, fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products, lean meats and poultry, seafood, eggs, beans and peas, and nuts and seeds into your family’s snacks and meals.

**Don’t panic over picky eaters**

Kids can be notoriously picky eaters. This is normal, and it’s unlikely they are not getting the nutrients they need to develop. If you don’t make a big deal about it, this phase will likely end before your child is school age. But if you have concerns, ask your pediatrician.
Healthy Snacks for Kids and Grown-ups (continued)

Keep it simple
Keep a variety of fresh, frozen, canned or dried fruit on hand for simple grab-and-go snacks. Single serving sizes of fat-free yogurt, low-fat pudding, natural applesauce and low-fat string cheese can give your kids energy during a tough homework session.

Make it easy — for them and for you!
Keep cut-up fruits and veggies in the fridge for those times when the mid-afternoon munchies hit. Offer the snacks with healthy dips like hummus and low-fat dressing.

Have them help
Enlist your older kids to help make their own trail mix, then put into snack-size bags. Let them pick their favorite unsalted nuts, dried fruit and fresh popped popcorn. You may add some dark chocolate chips or whole-grain pretzels. Let them create their own flavor of smoothies with low-fat or fat-free Greek yogurt; fresh, frozen fruit or 100 percent fruit juice. Adults may want to add chia or flax seeds for a boost of omega-3 fats.

Be an example
You may need to introduce a small portion of a new snack many times. Your child is more likely to try new foods if he or she sees you try new foods and hears you comment on the taste. It’s also good for your child to see you packing fruit or vegetables you plan to eat yourself as a snack on the fly.

Drinks count
Water is a good choice when your child is thirsty. Low-fat and fat-free milk is another good option. Preschoolers’ daily needs include 2 to 2½ cups of fat-free or low-fat dairy, including milk. The recommended amount for school-age children and adults is 2½ to 3 cups. Beverages labeled “100 percent fruit juice” are okay, too, in small amounts of 4 to 6 ounces. Remember, whole fresh, canned and dried fruits offer more fiber and in general are better choices.

For other ideas, visit ChooseMyPlate.gov to help you and your kids select healthy snacks they’ll enjoy.

Note: Some foods, like hot dogs, hard candy, dried fruit, grapes, popcorn, peanut butter or nuts, can make small children choke. Cut fruits and veggies into pieces smaller than a nickel. Cut round foods like cherry tomatoes and grapes in half. Cut hot dogs lengthwise. Always have your preschoolers sit down when they eat and monitor them when eating.