Food, Nutrition, and Herbs for Insomnia

If your mantra in life is, “I’ll sleep when I’m dead,” you might want to take 5 minutes to rethink this strategy. Driver fatigue is responsible for an estimated 25% of all fatal and serious car accidents and a continual lack of quality sleep is directly linked to weight gain, diabetes, and cardiovascular disorders. You can pump the weights and crank up the cardio, but if you are not balancing your body with the healing powers of sleep, you won’t be able to stave off these debilitating symptoms and conditions forever. In fact, pushing your mind and body beyond its natural limits without rewarding it with well-earned sleep can result in chronic fatigue, adrenal dysfunction, and hormone dysregulation.

Not convinced? Research confirms that lack of sleep is also directly linked to:

- Shrinking of the brain
- Organ failure
- Infertility
- Memory reduction
- Cancer
- Depression
- Obesity
- Chronic illness
- Premature aging
- Reduced life expectancy

Luckily, stacking your fork with slumber-inducing snacks is easier than you think. But can you really eat yourself to sleep? Is it possible to create your best dreamscape while stuffing your face? Is your dinner your best doctor? Yes, yes, and definitely yes.

The Science of Sleep

There are more than a dozen interconnected hormones and chemicals responsible for the onset and execution of a successful sleep session. They're all important ingredients for a dream feast, but having a bite-sized understanding of these primary components will see you to sleep in no time.

Melatonin

Melatonin is a hormone that is produced by the pineal gland in the brain. It's a vital element of the system that regulates your internal body clock and natural sleep-wake rhythms.

How and when your body creates and releases melatonin is contingent upon light exposure in the day and the gradual onset of darkness in the evening. Levels start to rise from early evening, remain high and steady throughout the night, and begin to drop off in the early morning hours.

Healthy levels are attributed to the ability to fall asleep quickly, to reduced or eliminated sleep interruptions, and to being able to wake easily at consistent times. In addition, melatonin is a powerful antioxidant. It is capable of free radical scavenging throughout the entire body due to its ability to penetrate cell membranes and navigate the blood-brain barrier.

Though there is still much to learn about this heroic hormone, there is growing evidence that supports the positive impact melatonin may have on countless biological functions. From heavy metal chelation, Alzheimer's Disease treatments, and obesity prevention to insomnia, immune function, and seasonal affective disorder (SAD) treatment, melatonin is king.

Studies show, melatonin has a hand in:

- Immune function

- Jet lag recovery
- Headache reduction (particularly cluster headaches)
- Managing sleep cycle disruption due to night or shift work
- Delayed sleep phase syndrome treatment
- Controlling sleep disorders associated with autism, cerebral palsy, blindness, and ADHD
- Reducing withdrawal symptoms after quitting smoking
- Medication or pharmaceutical induced insomnia
- Helping to fight certain types of cancer (particularly brain, breast, colon, lung, and renal)
- Reducing the side effects associated with chemotherapy
- Reducing the impact and instance of tinnitus
- Protection from radioactivity
- Prevention of gallstone development
- Improved fertility

Studies suggest that it may be especially useful to treat sleep issues that are due to behavioral, developmental, or mental disorders.

Tryptophan

Tryptophan is an essential amino acid that is responsible for making melatonin and serotonin. Humans cannot synthesize it, and a lack of tryptophan would be lethal; it must be obtained from plant or animal sources.

This vital molecule is helpful in dealing with sleep disorders including sleep apnea, insomnia, and bruxism. It may also have a serious psychological impact, with low levels showing a correlation with depression, anxiety, irritability, and aggression. Conditions such as PMS, ADHD, and Tourette’s syndrome all show symptom relief when consistently healthy tryptophan levels are present.

Due to the link with both serotonin and melatonin, tryptophan induces feelings of calm, relaxation, well-being and

sleepiness. It also assists your body in manufacturing and assimilating proteins for cellular function and efficiently assists with niacin production and conversion.

Cortisol

Cortisol is the flight-or-fight hormone responsible for a wide range of functions and reactions in the body. Produced in the adrenal glands, it is transported throughout the body via the bloodstream. Cortisol creates the rise and shine impulse that wakes you up in the morning. Maintaining homeostasis of this hormone is an essential component to finding that sweet sleep spot.

Cortisol levels peak between 8-9 am. and respond to daily activity levels. Production sharply declines between midnight and 4am. This balance creates what is known as a diurnal rhythm (being awake during the day, sleeping at night).

Depending upon the cells it is interacting with, cortisol can have a directly positive impact on your stress response, blood pressure, and inflammation reduction. It also influences blood sugar control, metabolism regulation, and memory formation.

However, both high and low cortisol levels will have a negative influence on your ability to fall and stay asleep.

Cortisol regulates energy by selecting the right nutrients the body needs to function. When elevated for extended periods of time, cortisol can interfere with weight, immune function, and chronic disease.

Experiencing a spike of cortisol late in the day or evening can induce an elongated stress response due to adrenaline release that prevents the yummy wind down after a long day. Similarly, dysregulation can cause unhelpful hiccups of cortisol through the night that interfere with a solid sleep state and those vital REM periods.

Excess cortisol may present as an inability to shut your brain down at night and racing thoughts that often focus on negative experiences in the past or worries about the future – otherwise known as being “tired but wired”.

Overproduction of cortisol can be caused by being overworked, routinely stressed, worn down, or chronically ill. Over time, this can manifest as adrenal fatigue, insomnia, sleep disruption, and depression.

Low levels will reduce the “cortisol awakening response”. Energy is often at a bare minimum, inducing a state of chronic fatigue. This can prevent initiation of other hormone cycles or incite overreaction of others, creating a negative feedback loop.

GABA (Gamma Aminobutyric Acid)

GABA is the primary inhibitory neurotransmitter and the most important amino acid for sleep, muscle relaxation, and anxiety reduction. In short, it turns off the worrying thoughts that impede restful sleep and prepares the mind for mood balancing subconscious decongesting. These sedating effects have a huge impact on sleep quality and quantity.

GABA can be helpful with relaxation and the ability to fall and stay asleep. It has also useful in dealing with restless leg syndrome, muscle spasms, and even epilepsy.

Low levels of GABA can prevent you from going into a deep sleep, which allows minor distractions to wake you up and prevent you from nodding off again. In addition, low GABA is linked to depression, anxiety and other psychiatric disorders.

Poor diet, illness, age, and exposure to environmental toxins can all affect the GABA levels.

When to Eat

Eating yourself to sleep involves diet consciousness. Get familiar with the best foods for supporting those 40 winks.

Make sure you’re not consuming the wrong stuff at the wrong time. It confuses the natural flow of chemicals and hormones that orchestrate revitalizing rest, which can be a tripwire for general system dysregulation. All sources of caffeine should be consumed before 2 pm. For sensitive folk, this includes chocolate. Additionally, avoid taking Vitamin D supplements or Fermented Cod Liver Oil after 2 pm. Ideally, you should stop eating for 4 hours before bed, but at the very least, skip heavy, spicy, and/or difficult to digest meals within that time frame.

If necessary, eat a small high protein/high fat snack at 7pm or earlier to tide you over and keep your blood sugar balanced. A handful of nuts promotes tryptophan production. To keep nighttime interruptions to a minimum, stop drinking about 2 hours prior to bed.

Foods and Substances That Prevent Sleep

Trans fatty acids and industrial seed oils (vegetable, canola, margarines, and shortenings) promote systemic inflammation, that encourage biological stress. Foods with a high glycemic index will also interfere with natural sleep patterns by spiking blood sugar and cortisol response. These include simple carbs, sugar, fruit juices, sodas, and energy drinks.

Pharmaceuticals, Over the Counter Meds, and Substances

Medications can be seriously disruptive to sleep, but also very sneaky. It’s often difficult to ascertain whether those

tablets are tampering with your sleep, particularly if you are taking multiple medications. Have a rifle through your medicine cabinet to check whether one of these top culprits is causing problems.

- Alpha-blockers and Beta Blockers
- SSRI antidepressants
- Angiotensin II-receptor blockers (ARBs)
- Cholinesterase inhibitors and ACE inhibitors
- Second-generation (nonsedating) H1 antagonists
- Glucosamine and chondroitin
- Statins
- Corticosteroids

Nicotine and THC (marijuana) could also be a factor.

The Best Sleep Diet

Let’s eat! It’s time to breakfast, lunch, and dinner ourselves into bed. These dietary additions will manufacture the building blocks of structural hormone and chemicals to balance and promote the best sleep.

Follow an organic, anti-inflammatory diet that excludes processed products and is high in whole foods, healthy fats, vegetables, and some fruits. Along with plenty of nuts and seeds, you’ll be able to load up on important antioxidants and phytonutrients while maximizing fiber intake. Be sure to keep your Omega 3 and Omega 6 fatty acid intake ratio within the 1:3-1:4 range.

Top Foods for Melatonin Management

- Tart cherry juice
- Bananas, oranges, pineapple
- Tomatoes, bell peppers, sweet corn
- Barley, oats, rice
- Flaxseed, walnuts, almonds

- Fenugreek and mustard seeds

Top Foods for Tryptophan Production

- Seeds and nuts
- Soy
- Cheese
- Red meat
- Poultry
- Fish and shellfish
- Beans and lentils
- Eggs

Top Foods for Cortisol Control

- Cold water fish
- Beef liver
- Eggs
- Greek or fermented yogurt
- Flaxseed and walnuts
- Chard (swiss, ruby, rainbow)
- Citrus fruits and papaya
- White beans

Top Foods That Promote GABA

- Black, green, oolong tea
- Halibut, mackerel, shrimp
- Beef liver
- Fermented foods
- Jumbo oats and rice bran
- Almonds and walnuts
- Lentils

Other Foods for Sleep

There are lots of additional options and substitutes for getting the most delicious sleep. Switch regular potatoes for

beta-carotene rich sweet potatoes, and that greasy side dish for some steamed dark leafy greens. Cook with coconut oil and drizzle a fresh salad with extra virgin olive or avocado oils. Incorporate grass fed gelatin and a dash of creamy milk into your smoothies.

In the evening, make up a brew of your favorite herbal tea. Chamomile, mint, lavender and St. John’s Wort are particularly soothing.

What Supplements Promote Good Sleep

Finding the right combination of supplemental additions to your diet and routine is extremely personal. There is no one-size-fits all approach, so careful experimentation and observation is an important part of finding what’s right for you.

Herbs

- Spirulina
- Valerian
- Hops
- Ashwagandha
- Passion flower
- Lemon balm
- Lavender
- Skull cap
- Chamomile
- Holy basil

Vitamins and Minerals

- Magnesium
- Potassium
- Vitamin B6
- Vitamin B12

- Vitamin D3

Supplements and Extracts

- L-theanine
- L-tryptophan
- L-dopa
- Taurine
- Melatonin
- 5-HTP
- GABA
- Ornithine

Final Thoughts

Stop hiding your sleep worries under the bed. Make integrating these balancing practices into your routine a daily, lifetime habit. Eat yourself to sleep, sleep yourself to life.`

Recommended Products:

- Shillington’s Nerve Sedative
- Non-toxic Mattress
- Non-toxic Pillow
- Sleep Maintenance – Gaia Herbs
- Vitamin B
- Vitamin D
- 5-HTP (hydroxytryptophan) • 90c – Thorne Research
- More supplements for insomnia
- L-Tryptophan • 60c- Thorne Research
- More supplements for insomnia

Recommended Reading:

- *Insomnia – A Comprehensive Look with Natural Remedies*
- *How Candida Leads to Depression, Anxiety, ADHD, and Other Mental Disorders*
- *How I Overcame Depression Naturally*

- *The Power of Our Hormones and How To Balance Them*
- *The Glymphatic System – How Insomnia Leads to a Filthy Mind*
- *Mental Health, Physical Health & B Vitamins – Nature's Valium*
- *Understand Hypothyroidism – Prevention and Natural Remedies*
- *Understanding Stress, Chronic Stress, and Adrenal Fatigue*
- *What Causes Chronic Inflammation, and How To Stop It For Good*
- *Gluten, Candida, Leaky Gut Syndrome, and Autoimmune Diseases*

Sources:

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- *Guide to Getting Great Sleep*, www.wellnessmama.com
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- *Cortisol – Its Role in Stress, Inflammation, and Indication for Diet Therapy*, www.todaysdietician.com
- *Tryptophan: What Does it Do?,* www.psychologytoday.com
- *Good Sleepers Have 30% More of This Brain Chemical*, www.progressivehealth.com
- *8 Foods to Naturally Increase Melatonin for Better Sleep*, www.naturalsociety.com
- *Foods With Natural Melatonin*, www.nutritionfacts.org
- *Top Ten Foods that Balance Cortisol for Optimal Body Composition*, main.poliquingroup.com
- *Gaba & Serotonin Deficiency Anxiety*, www.balancingbrainchemistry.co.uk
- *Ten Types of Meds That Can Cause Insomnia*, www.aarp.org
- *Sleep Hacking Part 3: Fall Asleep Fast with Biochemistry*, www.bulletproof.com