

Munchies and the Zzzz's

Eight hours of sleep is the golden rule, right? But, getting all those hours in isn't always the reality. Over the years we have learned a lot about what helps with good sleep and what gets in the way. Interestingly, we now know that *what* and *how* we eat throughout the day can affect sleep quality. That sleep, in turn, impacts tomorrow's attitude, energy levels, and food cravings. And the cycle repeats.

The good news is that this cycle can be improved by adjusting:

- What you eat,
- When you eat, &
- Water intake

WHAT YOU EAT

Sleep and food choices are interrelated. Poor sleep can trick your body and brain into thinking it is hungry and needs extra energy in the form of added sugars, the wrong kinds of fats, simple carbs, and/or caffeine. Many of these choices provide a temporary energy spike and then an energy crash.

How does this work? Lack of good sleep affects several hormones in the body related to hunger and food cravings. Specifically, increases in ghrelin and decreases in leptin work together to make you hungrier. Cortisol is a stress hormone in your body that stimulates appetite. Cortisol is further elevated by eating sugary and starchy foods.

What you can do. When hunger strikes, break the cycle by choosing long-lasting energy foods like fruits, vegetables, protein, and whole grains.

WHEN YOU EAT

Studies show that those who eat breakfast by 7 am and regularly eat at least every 5 hours are able to have a more regular sleep rhythm. Shortening the time between meals with snacks, combined with making good choices, keep cortisol levels stable.

Skipping meals and irregular eating is associated with poor sleep quality. (Think back to the beginning of the school year when being assigned a new lunch time is tough to get used to.)

How does this work? High cortisol levels at night, triggered by irregular eating schedules and intake of sugars, simple carbs, and caffeine, can disrupt deep (REM) sleep, preventing you from feeling rested no matter how many hours of sleep you fit in.

What to do. Front-loading with fruits, vegetables, protein foods, and whole grains for breakfast and lunch will give you the energy you need for your day and help you feel full and satisfied so that you don't choose foods later that will disrupt your sleep.

WATER INTAKE

Did you know that even mild dehydration can impact your concentration and mood? Sixty-percent (60%!) of your body is water and you lose that water through everyday activities without even thinking about it. Getting in the habit of sipping water over the course of the day will help stop dehydration energy slumps in their tracks.

How does this work? Physical activity, digestion, illness (and even breathing!) results in a loss of body water. Do you ever see your breath while waiting for the bus on a cold morning? That fog is the condensation of “water” leaving your body. The same thing occurs when you breathe at night.

What to do. Good hydration etiquette is more than drinking a full bottle of water before bed. To maintain a restful night’s sleep and pleasant morning, drink water throughout the day. And, remember, that fruits and vegetables count toward water intake! Cucumbers and watermelon are both great examples of hydrating produce.

More Tips & Tricks: Munch to Better Sleep

1. **Start your day right.** Mix up your breakfast choices by combining at least 2-3 food groups. (Think Greek yogurt parfait with fruit and nuts; oatmeal made with milk with dried fruit sprinkled on top; or whole grain toast with eggs and avocado on top.)
2. **Carry a see-through water bottle with you.** Seeing the water line move down throughout the day can be a mental trick to drinking more. Just remember to refill!
3. **Keep healthy snacks on hand for when you need them.** Fruits, cut vegetables, nuts/ nut butters, and cottage cheese are great examples of easy to carry options (or keep in the work fridge/ lunch box with an ice pack) to maintain cortisol levels throughout the day. Use MyPlate as a guide to learn about all kinds of options within the 5 food groups.
4. **Did you know that some foods can promote sleep?** Try tart cherry juice and kiwis to get melatonin (a hormone that regulates the wake-sleep cycle). Tryptophan, a protein found in high amounts in poultry and eggs, is famous for causing sleepiness after a Thanksgiving turkey meal!
5. **Do not wait that extra hour to have desert.** If having desert, try to have it closely after dinner. This will increase the time between your last food consumption and bedtime to increase sleepiness and shorten the time it takes to fall asleep.
6. **Find what sleep tricks work best for you!** It doesn’t take a full overhaul to improve sleep. Make tweaks over time and note what does and does not work for you.