

## Get a Better Night's Sleep

Sleeping well helps us to be more alert, have better concentration and mood and also reduces the risk of developing dementia and obesity. Whether you have difficulty getting to sleep, staying asleep or waking too early, you can improve your sleep quality by changing your diet and lifestyle.



Fluctuations in blood sugar (glucose) levels are associated with a diet which is high in sugar and refined carbohydrates, and these fluctuations can contribute to poor sleep. Smoother blood glucose levels can be achieved by reducing sugar and refined carbohydrates and also by increasing protein, fat and fibre in foods. Protein-rich foods include meat, fish, dairy and pulses. Fibre is found in vegetables and pulses. For more information on the best fats to include in your diet, see our information sheet Good Fats, Bad Fats.

The mineral magnesium is known as 'nature's tranquiliser'. It has a calming and relaxing effect on all tissues of the body including the brain. Tests of red blood cell levels of magnesium often reveal a deficiency or sub-optimal level. The best food sources are green leafy vegetables (magnesium is found in chlorophyll which provides the green colour in plants to enable them to photosynthesise).



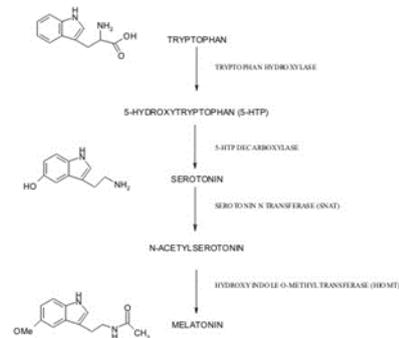
Many people simply can't get enough magnesium from diet alone (especially because intensive farming practices mean that magnesium levels in food has reduced over the past few decades). Magnesium is depleted by stress, alcohol and exercise. Supplementation of magnesium is often recommended on a trial basis of 3 months to see if it can make a difference.

*Note: magnesium does not cause drowsiness. However, magnesium acts as a natural calcium-channel blocker mimicking the effect of some blood pressure medications, so if you are taking medication to lower your blood pressure, you should be aware that your blood pressure may drop and you may need to ask your GP to lower your medication dose.*

Another very useful nutrient is the amino acid L-aurine. Amino acids are the building blocks of protein and L-aurine (or taurine) also acts as a neurotransmitter. At cellular level it has the same action as alcohol and benzodiazepines in activating your GABA receptor (albeit more subtly and without any intoxicating effect). Taurine is found in protein-rich food especially offal such as heart. Supplementation of taurine is also a good option.

Melatonin is a sleep hormone which is naturally produced as the evening light fades and we prepare for sleep. Lack of melatonin can prevent good quality sleep. Melatonin is produced within the body by transforming a dietary amino acid L-tryptophan into an intermediary amino acid called 5-hydroxy-tryptophan (5-HTP), then on to the neurotransmitter serotonin and finally to melatonin. Providing more raw materials for the production of melatonin (ie tryptophan from protein-rich food, or 5-HTP as a dietary supplement) can increase production of melatonin.

*Note: The supplements Tryptophan and 5-HTP are contra-indicated with antidepressant medication. They may also cause drowsiness in some people.*



Many herbal remedies can be useful in supporting sleep, taken either as a herbal tea or as a supplement. Some of the most popular include valerian, chamomile, passionflower and hops.

Caffeine (from coffee, tea and energy drinks) is a powerful stimulant and can be quite disruptive to sleep. As humans we have huge variation in how disruptive caffeine can be for sleep with some people seemingly able to tolerate a double-espresso late in the evening and others not being able to tolerate even a cup of tea after mid-morning. If you are having trouble sleeping it is worth cutting out all caffeine for a week or so to see what difference it makes to your sleep.

L-theanine, found in tea, is another amino acid with promising potential for supporting sleep. It is found in green tea which is very low in caffeine and naturally caffeine-free tea such as redbush tea so you can increase your L-theanine intake without taking in extra caffeine. L-theanine is also available as a dietary supplement.

Many people find that drinking alcohol can help them relax in the evening and believe that this can help them sleep. However, alcohol is known to disrupt sleep – it might help you get off to sleep but it often causes waking during the night or too early in the morning. Adopting some of the other measures above may help with evening relaxation and getting off to sleep so that you can break the habit of using alcohol in this way.

Sleep hygiene is the term to describe your behavioural habits and physical environment around sleep. Top of the list is reducing the use of electronics late in the evening as this is known to affect the ability to get to sleep and sleep quality. We recommend that you remove phones, tablets, laptops and television from the bedroom entirely. If you are using your phone as an alarm clock, we



recommend getting yourself a new alarm clock. Other sleep hygiene measures include black out blinds, noise reduction measures, switching off wi-fi to your home overnight, having a bath before bed (perhaps with some lavender oil).

Adequate physical activity during the day can help you to get to sleep in the evening. If you are currently very sedentary, then try to add in some more physical activity into your day (preferably not too late in the evening) – the type of activity is less important than ensuring it is something that you enjoy and will be able to fit into your life on a regular basis, so you will continue with it.