

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Sleeping Well in the Time of Coronavirus”

With all of the uncertainties in this chaotic and difficult pandemic time, it is important to try to get some restful sleep. According to the National Sleep Foundation (NSF), as many as one third of Americans do not get the recommended seven to eight hours per night. It is a good time to review what to eat and what to avoid for better sleep. According to the NSF, certain foods and beverages can actually help you sleep. They include: **Warm milk and herbal teas.** The traditional standard of warm milk still holds up today. Some researchers have shown an association between milk’s tryptophan and melatonin content and better sleep. In addition, caffeine-free herbal teas like chamomile, valerian, or passionflower can be just plain relaxing, especially if they are included in your nightly bedtime ritual. **Cottage cheese.** Because it’s high in lean protein, cottage cheese contains tryptophan, an amino acid known to increase serotonin levels. And, it’s even better if you put some raspberries on top, because they’re rich in melatonin. **Nuts.** For a quick, pre-bedtime snack, nuts are a good option because they contain melatonin, the hormone responsible for regulating sleep. Not only are they heart-healthy, but sleep-healthy as well. **Fruits.** In addition to raspberries, many fruits also contain melatonin, including tart cherries, bananas, pineapples, and oranges. **Whole grains.** Surprisingly, popcorn, oatmeal, or whole-wheat crackers with some sort of nut butter are much better choices before bed than complex carbohydrates like white bread, pasta, or sugary, baked items, that only act to reduce your serotonin levels. Foods to avoid before bed include: **Chips.** The sheer fat content of any chip should be a clear sign that you should stay away, especially before bedtime. Also, researchers found that eating greasy junk foods—like chips—can cause nightmares. **Chocolate.** Unfortunately, as delicious as chocolate is, it contains caffeine, which causes increased arousal and works to decrease your ability to fall into and sustain deeper sleep stages. In addition, chocolate—especially dark chocolate—also contains small amounts of theobromine which can increase heart rate and cause sleeplessness. White chocolate contains little, if any, caffeine, and no theobromine, and may be a better choice. **Matcha or green teas.** Unfortunately, green tea contains not only caffeine, but theobromine and theophylline, both of which can increase heart rate, cause feelings of nervousness, and increase overall anxiety. **Dried fruit.** The high-fiber, low-water content of dried fruit can cause digestive issues, including gas and cramping during the night. The culprit is sorbitol. **Oranges.** Because of their high acid content, oranges can cause or exacerbate heartburn.

In the America that I love, these tips may help you catch more zzz’s. It makes sense to choose your bedtime snacks wisely.

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