

Insomnia remedy may be in your kitchen

The way I see it, there is good insomnia, like when you can't sleep because you are excited or energized about an upcoming event or project, and then there is bad insomnia caused by stress, depression, inactivity, pain, indigestion or simply being unable to clear your mind.



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I have never taken too seriously articles about foods that are supposed to remedy insomnia because much of the evidence is anecdotal or from very small studies. And the recommendations are vague as to the amount of the foods that will be effective and how long before going to bed you should eat them. After a few sleepless nights, however, I decided to take a closer look.

The thing about experimenting with food remedies is that its effectiveness (or not) will be apparent and if one doesn't work, you can try another the next night without worrying about harmful or cumulative side effects. No harm is done and, at the least, you will likely have improved your diet because all of the recommended foods are healthy.

The first recommendation of many sources is to avoid caffeine, alcohol and chocolate (which contains caffeine) if you have insomnia. Even though I will be trying some of the suggestions that follow, just to be clear, I will not be giving up my morning coffee, afternoon glass of wine or daily dose of dark chocolate (which is actually way less than the recommended ounce).

Besides coffee and chocolate, energy drinks such as Red Bull and Five-Hour Energy contain large amounts of caffeine, as do Mountain Dew MDX, Jolt Cola and Vault. And it can take some

people as long as eight hours to metabolize caffeine.

Alcohol may make you sleepy at first, but as it metabolizes, it can wake you up often during the night and can diminish the amount of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep that is critical to a good night's sleep. If you enjoy a daily glass of wine, have it with a meal several hours before you go to bed.

Following are recommendations from health.com, eatingwell.com and health.usnews.com.

They include references to tryptophan and vitamin B6, which helps your body produce the sleep-inducing hormones melatonin and serotonin.

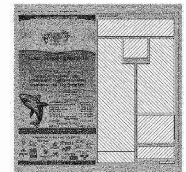
Milk: Even though milk contains tryptophan, comfort and pleasant dreams were the real reasons our moms used to give us warm milk before going to bed. And those soothing childhood memories are probably still the best reasons because you would have to drink an awful lot of milk to get a significant amount of that sleep-inducing chemical.

Some research suggests that a calcium deficiency might make it difficult to fall asleep. Milk and other dairy products contain a significant amount of calcium as do broccoli, kale, collards and other leafy greens.

Jasmine Rice: Jasmine rice ranks high on the list of foods that may help you sleep. A study cited in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition found that eating it four hours before going to bed

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significantly shortened the time it took to fall asleep when compared with consumption of long-grain rice. (I told you the studies were small.) The reason: It boosts production of tryptophan and





Creamy rice pudding with cinnamon ISTOCK

serotonin.

Fruits and Vegetables: Because cherries are one of the few natural foods that contain melatonin, a handful of fresh cherries or dried cherries or a glass of tart cherry juice could help you sleep.

Bananas contain the natural muscle relaxants magnesium and potassium (also good for cardiovascular health and cognitive functioning). They are carbohydrates, which promote sleep, and they provide tryptophan and vitamin B6. It takes about an hour for tryptophan to reach the brain.

Sweet potatoes provide sleep-promoting carbohydrates as well as muscle relaxing potassium.

Fortified Cereals and Whole

Grains: Whole-grain cereals such as shredded wheat provide sleep-inducing complex carbohydrates. Eaten with milk and a little banana, their sleep-friendly benefits triple. Oatmeal contains calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, silicon and potassium, all of which promote sleep. Cereals fortified with vitamin B6 help the body produce melatonin.

And whole grains like quinoa, bulgar, barley and buckwheat provide muscle-relaxing magnesium.

Tea: Non-caffeinated teas made from valerian root, motherwort, chamomile, catnip and other herbs are associated with drowsiness. But it may just be the ritual of brewing and sipping tea before bed that relaxes you.

Protein: Sleep researcher Jacob Teitelbaum suggests that high-protein foods eaten at bedtime promote sleep and fight acid reflux. He suggests two slices of lean meat or cheese, a hard-boiled egg, some cottage cheese mixed with fresh fruit or a handful of pumpkin seeds.

I guess if the lean meat is tryptophan-containing turkey, so much the better, although other sources say you would have to eat a lot of it to get enough to make you fall asleep. (Think: Thanksgiving.)

Almonds are full of protein and provide magnesium as well. Fish and chickpeas have vitamin B6, which promotes melatonin production.

Some researchers suggest that eating protein before going to bed means your body will be focusing on digesting and not sleeping.

In fact, eating a full meal of any kind can impair sleep, according to Food Network dietitian Ellie Krieger. But going to bed hungry can have the same effect. Krieger suggests a carb-rich bedtime snack:

JASMINE RICE PUDDING

Ingredients:

- 4 cups plus $\frac{2}{3}$ cup whole milk, divided use
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup jasmine rice
- 7 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 1 vanilla bean
- 1 (3-inch) cinnamon stick
- 2 large egg yolks
- Lightly sweetened whipped cream for serving (optional)

Method:

In a 4-quart saucepan, combine 4 cups of the milk with the rice and sugar. With a paring knife, split the vanilla bean lengthwise, scrape out the seeds, and add them to the pan. Add the scraped vanilla bean and the cinnamon stick and bring the mixture to a boil over medium heat. Reduce the heat as necessary to maintain a simmer; cook, stirring frequently but gently, until the rice is completely tender, about 25 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat.

In a medium bowl, whisk the egg yolks until smooth. Whisk in about 1 cup of the hot rice mixture. Pour the egg mixture back into the pan, add the remaining $\frac{2}{3}$ cup milk, and stir with a wooden spoon until thoroughly blended. Put the pan over medium heat and cook, stirring constantly, just until the mixture begins to boil, about 2 minutes.

Transfer the rice pudding to a bowl and place a piece of plastic wrap directly on its

surface. Set the bowl in an ice bath to cool the pudding quickly. When cool, discard the cinnamon stick and the vanilla bean. Divide pudding among 6 small bowls or ramekins, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 3 hours before serving. Serve topped with a spoonful of whipped cream, if using.

Adapted from fincooking.com.