

Sleepy foods

by Pina LoGiudice ND, LAc and Peter Bongiorno ND, LAc
Directors of [Inner Source Health](http://www.InnerSourceHealth.com) (www.InnerSourceHealth.com)

Sleep problems (known as insomnia) is one of the most common complaints with about 30% of people who would say their sleep is problematic. Ten percent of the population has insomnia (1). Technically, insomnia is defined as having significant problems falling and / or staying asleep for at least one month, and these problems can cause us trouble with daily life and stop us from feeling our best.



Why Do We Need Sleep?

Sleeping problems make it hard for our bodies to repair, detoxify, lose weight, balance blood sugar and digest. Studies have also shown inadequate sleep lowers natural killer cells, which are the immune cells that fight cancer (2). One study suggests that our ability to fight viruses like the common cold decreases 300% when we get less than 7 hours of sleep (3).

Sleeping Pills Increase My Risk of Death?

In 2008, over 56 million sleeping medications were prescribed in the U.S. (4), and most experts believe the stress from worldwide economic challenges have only increased these numbers. While these pills can help us fall and stay asleep, it is known that these medications do not allow the body to fall into the deep phases of sleep that allow for the best health benefits sleep can give us. It is also well-known that all of these medications have risk of dependence and withdrawal effects, which can make them hard to stop using.

Most alarmingly, a large study of 30,000 people published in the February 2012 issue of the British Medical journal found a 300% increase in death in people who took fewer than 18 sleeping pills a year. Higher doses were linked to a greater than 500% increase in death. The authors of this study

concluded that these sleeping drugs 'may have been associated with 320,000 to 507,000 excess deaths in the USA alone (5)

Naturopathic Sleep Solutions



In our clinic, we have found excellent results for insomnia. Since nighttime is often a time when our busy days of work, stress and distraction finally wind down, we believe the nighttime may be the first chance your brain has to process your life and the day. At this time thoughts race through and can keep us up. Keeping nighttime rituals including getting to bed at the same time (preferably between 10P and 11:30PM), using orange lighting 1 hour before bed, shutting all computers, cell phones and bright lights, as well as sipping calming herbal teas like chamomile and linden can be very helpful.

Temporarily, we may also recommend natural sleep aids such as melatonin, tryptophan, valerian or some calming aids like Passionflower and theanine to help reset your body rhythms. Chinese formulas like Bu Nao Wan or Suan Zao Ren Tang can help calm the mind and induce healthy sleep. One author (PB) has also personally found excellent results using acupuncture to reset and get to sleep during a time of insomnia.

Foods for Sleep

Food can be a strong support in the quest for a good night sleep. Some insomnia sufferers wake at night because their blood sugar drops too low. Adequate protein and healthy fat intake can help stabilize blood sugar through the night, and allow the liver to let out stored sugar molecules as needed for a good night sleep. Foods can also support the healthy production of brain neurotransmitters and create calming results in the body.

Here are the most common sleep scenarios, and some of our favorite food solutions for sleep:

Trouble falling asleep?

Try MONTMORENCY TART CHERRIES

The Montmorency cherry is a type of sour cherry. The color is not as dark as the cherries we typically see in the stores. These cherries are great for they have about 6 times the amount of melatonin than a regular cherry. If you can find a cherry Juice concentrate, this will also increase the concentration of melatonin even more.

Melatonin is a hormone produced in your brain's pineal gland. When it gets dark outside, your eyes sense the lighting change and starts making this hormone, which communicates to your body it is time to prepare to sleep. Melatonin helps keep your daily body rhythms, and is an important antioxidant in the body known to fight cancer. In fact, low amounts are shown to increase risk of cancer.¹

You can find these special cherries in some fine food stores when they are in season. Sometimes they can be found in the frozen section, or look to for a Montmorency cherry juice concentrate.

Trouble Staying Asleep?

Try PUMPKIN SEED POWDER



Pumpkin seeds and the powder from pumpkin seed have relatively high amounts of the amino acid tryptophan. Tryptophan is the amino acid the body uses to make the feel good and relaxation neurotransmitter serotonin. Pumpkin

seeds also contain high amounts of zinc, which can help the brain convert tryptophan into serotonin. Serotonin levels are typically low in people who cannot stay asleep, and wake throughout the night.

Some research suggests benefit using this food as a method to help sleep². It is best to take about 1 cup of seeds or ½ cup of the powder

with applesauce or another healthy carbohydrate, for the carbohydrate allows the tryptophan to get into the brain in higher amounts.

Occasional trouble winding down to fall asleep?

Try “PULQUE”

Still relatively unfamiliar to most of us, Pulque is an thousand year-old native Mexican milk-colored alcoholic beverage made from the fermented sap of the maguey plant (a type of Agave) and is high in melatonin. This drink is a bit more frothy and less alcoholic than its modern beer counterpart. While it is an age-old drink, it is actually a bit of a craze right now for those in their twenties.



Due to its melatonin content and alcohol content, it functions as a relaxant that can help someone unwind in the evening and prepare for sleep. As such, it is best to have after dinner. It should not be used by anyone with a history or tendency for alcoholism and should not be ingested by minors or pregnant women. We also do not recommend it as a daily solution – just an occasional one.

Nervous exhaustion with nighttime sleeplessness?

Try SCOTTISH OATMEAL



A favorite breakfast food, oatmeal is really a cereal grain made from the herb Avena sativa. Avena is known in traditional herbal medicine as a calming plant that is nutritious for a frazzled nervous system. We often recommend regular intake of oatmeal to help our patients' bodies cope with long

term stressors more effectively.

Oats contains melatonin and complex carbohydrates that can help more tryptophan get into the brain to help you sleep. It also contains vitamin B6, a vitamin which is a co-factor that helps more serotonin get produced in the brain as well.

While you might think of oatmeal only as a breakfast food, it also is a smart choice for a bedtime snack. The Scottish recommend a bowl of oatmeal gruel in the evening to get you feeling nice and sleepy.

Hormonal Issues with Sleep Problems?

Try some DANDELION

Dark green leafy vegetables have more nutrients than we will probably ever completely understand. While dandelion is not traditionally known as a sleep-inducing food, we have found using the liver cleansing properties of dandelion to be a valuable aid in helping sleep.

A healthy liver will balance blood sugar. Blood sugar fluctuations and drops are a major factor in insomnia and waking at night. Hormonal issues, especially in peri and post-menopause can also stop a woman from obtaining a good night sleep. In Chinese medicine terms, foods like dandelion can help balance the liver and nourish the yin, which ultimately strengthens the function of the blood, fluids and hormonal balance.

We like our dandelion as part of a good dinner. We often steam or blanch the dandelion first, then sauté with garlic and organic extra virgin olive oil.



Conclusion

There are many causes of poor sleep and regular sleep problems can hurt our overall health. Medications can help us get to sleep, but carry a high risk. Long term healthy solutions include balancing blood sugar, creating

healthy sleep rituals, and can include using foods like pumpkin seed, oatmeal, dandelion, montmorency cherries and an occasional Pulque to help naturally induce a good sleep. Nighty night.

Written by: Pina LoGiudice ND, LAc and Peter Bongiorno ND, LAc of www.InnerSourceHealth.com. 03-11-2012

References:

- 1. M Irwin, A Mascovich, JC Gillin, R Willoughby, J Pike and TL Smith Partial sleep deprivation reduces natural killer cell activity in humans Psychosomatic Medicine, Vol 56, Issue 6 493-498*
 - 2. Sheldon Cohen, William J. Doyle, Cuneyt M. Alper, Denise Janicki-Deverts, Ronald B. Turner, Sleep Habits and Susceptibility to the Common Cold Arch Intern Med. 2009;169(1):62-67.*
 3. Gallene, D. Sleeping pill use grows as economy keeps people up at night. Los Angeles Times. March 30, 2009.
 4. Kripke DF, Langer RD, Kline LE. Hypnotics' association with mortality or cancer: a matched cohort study. *BMJ Open*. 2012 Feb 27;2(1):e000850.
 5. Burkhardt S, Tan DX, Manchester LC, Hardeland R, Reiter RJ. Detection and quantification of the antioxidant melatonin in Montmorency and Balaton tart cherries (*Prunus cerasus*). *J Agric Food Chem*. 2001 Oct;49(10):4898-902.
 6. Hudson C, Hudson SP, Hecht T, MacKenzie J. Protein source tryptophan versus pharmaceutical grade tryptophan as an efficacious treatment for chronic insomnia. *Nutr Neurosci*. 2005 Apr;8(2):121-7.
-