

Finding the Right Combination for a Good Night's Sleep

Andrew Jacka, *The Nation* (Bangkok)

With the average person spending around a third of their life in bed, the quality of this time spent there can have a major impact on the rest of our day. Poor or disturbed sleep can affect your work, concentration and ability to interact with others. Good-quality sleep enables physical and mental restoration ensuring you face each day "fresh and alert."

The amount of sleep that each individual needs varies, with most spending between seven and nine hours. Too much sleep, just like too little sleep, will leave you feeling tired and irritable. Babies and children spend longer periods asleep, as it is while they sleep that growth hormones are released. It is for this reason that as we grow older we need less sleep, because the release of growth hormones diminishes significantly.

With natural chemicals in the body enhancing our sleeping, what we eat also impacts on our sleep. A light snack before retiring can help to promote sleep, but too much can prevent or disturb sleep as our body struggles to digest the food. Small amounts of alcohol can also promote sleep, but as it is metabolized your sleep can become fragmented. Any food that contains caffeine (a stimulant) can also disturb your sleeping pattern. Warm milk and honey is a commonly recommended food to assist with sleeping, but a turkey sandwich can be just as good. This is because both milk and turkey contain tryptophan, an amino acid that not only is necessary for the production of Vitamin B3 (niacin) but also naturally induces sleep through its assistance in the production of serotonin. The addition of carbohydrates (honey to the milk and the bread in the sandwich) facilitate the amino acids' direct access to the brain. Tryptophan is not available in all foods, but some of the best dietary sources are soy protein, brown rice, cottage cheese, fish, beef, liver, lamb, peanuts, pumpkins, sesame seeds, and lentils, but before you get too excited, for your body to utilize tryptophan fully, it is best consumed on an empty stomach.

Herbs such as chamomile, hops, lemon balm and peppermint can also assist in sleeping.

While exercise is important for a healthy body, strenuous exercise before sleep can be detrimental to sleep—stop exercising at least two to three hours before sleeping. This also applies to eating, and definitely no heavy meals before you plan to sleep. Avoid long midday naps and excessive mental stimulation before sleeping. Ideally, try to go to bed at the same time each day, and reading, soothing music and meditation will assist you in your preparation for sleep, as will the wearing of light, loose fitting and comfortable nightwear. You're your bedroom as quiet as possible, blocking outside noise or at least masking it with inside noise such as that of a fan. Do not use your bedroom for work, and definitely do not watch TV in your bedroom, as, in addition

to the mental stimulation this causes, you have the added problem of the constantly emitting electrical field (even when the TV is "switched off"). Try to deal with any problems or concerns you have before you go to bed—they will not allow for a restful night.

If you have tried all of the aforementioned suggestions and you still find yourself tossing and turning, then do not try to force yourself to sleep: Get out of bed and read a book or do some other meditative activity until you feel sleepy and then go to bed. It is important that you still get out of bed at your "regular" time.

If all else fails in your search for a restful night's sleep, a visit to your health professional may be necessary to rule out health problems like insomnia, obesity, and sleeping disorders such as sleep apnoea. These require professional advice to be dealt with effectively.

Sweet dreams!

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