

Although there has been little research on the effects of food on sleep, certain types of foods may promote sleep while others inhibit it.

Cherries are one of the only natural food sources of melatonin, the chemical that controls the body's internal clock to regulate sleep. Eating them an hour before bedtime may make it easier to fall asleep. Potassium and magnesium are natural muscle relaxants, and bananas are a good source of both. They also contain the amino acid L-tryptophan, which gets converted to 5-HTP in the brain. The 5-HTP in turn is converted to serotonin (a relaxing neurotransmitter) and melatonin. Eating a banana before bed or during the night when you can't sleep may aid sleep. Carbohydrate-rich foods such as bread or pasta trigger the release of tryptophan and serotonin, two brain chemicals that aid sleep. A bowl of oatmeal is high in melatonin, which many people take as a sleep aid. Like bananas, milk contains the amino acid L-tryptophan, which turns to 5-HTP and releases relaxing serotonin. It's also high in calcium, which promotes sleep.

Avoid foods before bedtime that inhibit sleep. Ham, bacon, sausages, and smoked meats contain high levels of the amino acid tyramine, which triggers the brain to release norepinephrine, a brain stimulant that makes us feel alert. Be careful of chocolate since it contains caffeine. Many people are increasingly sensitive to caffeine as they get older, and even the little chocolate chunks in chocolate chip ice cream could disturb sleep. Chocolate also contains tyrosine, a stimulating amino acid. Red Bull and other energy drinks are high in caffeine as well as the amino acid taurine, which boosts alertness and adrenaline. Recent studies have shown that even if you drink energy drinks early in the day, the combined high dosage of taurine and caffeine can make it hard to sleep, or to sleep well, later on. Finally, digestive disturbances are a common source of sleep problems, but many people fail to make the connection. Acidic and spicy foods can cause reflux, heartburn, and other symptoms that interrupt sleep.