



# Ask a Nutritionist

by Tara Postnikoff

## Promoting Proper Sleep

**Q:** What foods can help runners get a good night's sleep?

**A:** Sleep is absolutely essential to a healthy mind and body. Sleep allows the body to rest and repair itself. Impaired sleep patterns and sleep deprivation decrease mental and physical function, increasing stress on the body. This translates to poor exercise recovery, reduced immunity as well as the tendency to overeat and gain weight due to hormone disruption. In other words, make sleep a priority! Aim for seven to nine hours per night to stay healthy, enhance recovery and improve performance.

The foods you consume or don't consume can impact your ability to sleep well. It's no surprise that caffeine is a sleep inhibitor, which is why most people tend to drink coffee in the morning. Caffeine sensitivity varies greatly from one person to the next, but if you have problems sleeping, try reducing, eliminating, or avoiding caffeine after 1:00 p.m. This includes coffee, tea, soft drinks, chocolate, and energy drinks.

Alcohol is another sleep inhibitor, although many think of it as a sleep aid. Alcohol impairs sleep by releasing adrenaline and inhibits the transport of tryptophan to the brain (which is the source of serotonin). So while you may feel relaxed after a drink, your body is not. Additionally, because alcohol is a type of sugar, this will further stimulate your body.

Sugar is another culprit in poor sleep. Sugar is rapidly digested in the body and acts as a short-term stimulant. Sugar too close to bedtime may lead to waking up at 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. due to a hypo-glycemic response. Sleep may be inhibited because of the release of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol in efforts to stabilize blood sugar.

Tryptophan, an amino acid, is a precursor for neurotransmitters serotonin and melatonin, which govern your ability to fall asleep. You can help promote sleep by eating food rich in tryptophan. It is found in animal products including turkey, milk, cottage cheese, chicken, eggs, and red meat. Other sources are bananas, pumpkin seeds and almonds. Consume these foods with a carbohydrate source to allow for more tryptophan absorption in the brain.

Magnesium, a mineral, relaxes the muscles and nervous system to help calm your mind and body to cause sleep. Magnesium-rich foods include green leafy vegetables such as kelp, dulse, and collards; and nuts such as almonds, cashews, Brazil nuts and seeds. Wheat bran, wheat germ, buckwheat and millet are also high in magnesium. If you are going to supplement with magnesium, then start with a small dose such as 150mg of magnesium citrate before bed, and see if that helps promote sleep.

Melatonin is a hormone produced by the pineal gland that influences sleep. If your melatonin levels are low, try consuming cherries. Otherwise, supplementing with 3 mg of

melatonin nightly can be used in the short term to help restore your circadian rhythm after time zone changes or periods of stress and impaired sleep. Do not take melatonin for more than three weeks at a time unless under professional advisement.

Valerian root, passionflower, lemon balm, chamomile, and skull-cap are all great sleep promoting herbs. Try an herbal tea with a blend of the above ingredients 45 minutes before bed to help with relaxation.

Lastly, avoid eating a large meal before bed for better sleep. Digestion takes away from the body's ability to sleep well. Have dinner at least two hours before going to bed or have only a small snack with a carbohydrate and protein if you have less time before sleeping. **RR**

*Disclaimer: Always consult a qualified professional before starting any nutritional supplement.*

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**Sleep promoters**  
tryptophan ▲ magnesium ▲ melatonin ▲ herbals

**Sleep inhibitors**  
caffeine ▼ alcohol ▼ sugar