

# Eating for a Restful Sleep: Regulating the Sleep/Wake Cycle With Nutrition

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Every night, millions of people have trouble falling and/or staying asleep. Traditionally, this is caused by stress, anxiety, caffeine, a lack of physical activity or overstimulation before bed, as well as by nighttime discomfort or pain. But there is another common cause few consider—a poor diet.

If your patients are eating a poor diet, they may experience blood sugar swings, hunger pangs, cravings or other disturbances that affect their ability to sleep soundly. They may use prescription drugs to get to sleep, only to become dependent on them and frustrated by their side effects.

## The Prescription Problem

Prescription sleeping aids not only fail to address the underlying reasons for sleeplessness, but are often addictive and can have side effects ranging from diarrhea to daytime drowsiness. I've broken down the average pricing on some commonly prescribed sleep aids to give you an idea of the monthly and annual costs for the drugs your patients may be paying for (these represent the average costs for seven days):<sup>1</sup>

- Lunesta (1 mg tablet): \$56, which adds up to \$2,912 per year
- Sonata (10 mg capsule): \$38, which adds up to \$1,976 per year
- Ambien (5 mg tablet): \$54, which adds up to \$2,808 per year

Beyond diarrhea and drowsiness, other common side effects are headaches, dizziness and nausea. In more extreme cases, some have developed behavioral changes, difficulty swallowing or breathing, heartbeat irregularities, memory problems, or even hallucinations. And therefore seek further treatment for these symptoms, adding to their prescription list, worsening their health and draining their wallets.

An inability to sleep will no doubt affect the ability to work and function in the world, and can dramatically impact health. Sleeplessness can leave you feeling groggy, irritable, unable to focus, and less able to deal with stress. Even minimal amounts of sleep loss will take a toll on mood, energy, and efficiency. Over time, these effects can cause weight gain, getting sick more easily and becoming susceptible to a wide variety of chronic illnesses.

## The Good News: You Can Help

By educating your patients about the role nutrition plays in their ability to sleep (and in their overall health), you can help them make better choices in the future. You can provide nutritional guidelines, supplements, coaching sessions, meal plans and other resources they need to successfully change the way they eat.

The problem is our society accepts subpar eating habits as "normal." With fast-food restaurants on every corner and junk food in every convenience store, your patients may not even realize that the

way they are eating is unhealthy. This means the first thing you'll have to do is educate them about the value of a well-rounded, nutrient-rich diet.

Patients who are suffering from insomnia need to understand that the foods they eat have a direct effect on every aspect of their health, including their ability to sleep. They need to understand that by giving the body 100 percent nutrition, they pave the way for the body to readjust its biological clock and remove the impediments that currently interfere with their sleep.

#### A Nutrition / Supplement Plan to Help Regulate Sleep

When used in conjunction with a healthy, nutrient-rich diet, supplements can help to fill in the gaps and ensure your patients are getting 100 percent nutrition. For those suffering from insomnia, I recommend the following:

**Calcium:** Low levels of calcium in the body are known to contribute to frequent awakenings in the night. This mineral has a natural calming effect on the nervous system and works by helping the body convert tryptophan (an essential amino acid) into serotonin. Serotonin can be converted into melatonin, a key hormone that helps to regulate the sleep cycle.<sup>2</sup>

**Magnesium** helps the body properly absorb and utilize calcium, helping to calm the nervous system and relax muscles. A magnesium deficiency can cause leg cramps and spasms, which inhibits restful slumber.<sup>3</sup>

**Vitamin B12** aids in the metabolism of calcium and magnesium, working with them to ensure that tryptophan is converted into serotonin (and then, into melatonin). This makes B12 essential for a healthy sleep cycle.<sup>4</sup>

**Vitamin D:** Most Americans suffer from low levels of vitamin D, even though this vitamin is essential in supporting the body's usage of calcium and magnesium. It also helps in modulating the body's biological 24-hour clock as it relates to the sleep/wake cycle.<sup>5</sup>

**Melatonin** is a powerful hormone that helps to regulate the body's sleep and wake cycles. Supplementing with melatonin can help to reset a patient's biological clock and convince the body to fall asleep at the proper time.<sup>6</sup>

Herbs can also provide natural relief from insomnia. I typically recommend a combination of valerian root, chamomile and hops flower. Together, these herbs promote restfulness and make it easier to fall asleep.

#### References

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MAY 2018

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