



# Night & Day

EATING TO RELAX

EATING TO ENERGIZE

BY HEIDI REICHENBERGER-MCINDOO, MS, RD, LDN

**H**ave you ever grabbed a candy bar from the vending machine for a late-afternoon pick-me-up or sipped a mug of warm milk to help settle into a long night's sleep? Chances are you've tried at least one of these food cures. But are they the right choices for the job?

While food's primary duty is to nourish us and keep our bodies healthy, it's really the ultimate multitasker, performing so many other roles in our lives. We celebrate with food and socialize with it. Food comforts us when we're upset. We give it as gifts and so much more. And throughout the day the food choices you make are a major factor in determining how you feel. Will you be cranky, productive, listless, or alert? At night will you drift off to a peaceful sleep or will you toss and turn for hours?

I spoke with some of the nation's leading food and nutrition experts to find out which foods and drinks will power

up your day and which ones will help you dream away the night.

## EATING FOR ENERGY

### *What Works:*

Although it may seem obvious, simply eating is step one toward having energy during the day. Countless Americans skip or miss meals because they're too busy, not hungry, or hope to drop a few pounds. They then wonder why they continually feel run down throughout the day. Think of food as the gas your body's engine needs to run. Without it, you'll sputter out before the day is through. Small, frequent meals, says Sue Moores, MS, RD, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association (ADA), can provide the energy you need to run all day. In addition, "The combo of carbs, protein, fat, and fiber help satiety, delay hunger, and control blood sugar giving you sustained energy," according to

Cynthia Sass, RD, also a spokesperson for the ADA and author of *Your Diet is Driving Me Crazy: When Food Conflicts Get in the Way of Your Love Life*.

#### **What Doesn't Work:**

Just as food can boost you up, it can drag you down. "Avoid high fat and large meals," warns David Grotto, RD, LDN, host of Chicago-based *Health and Lifestyles Weekly*. "They take more energy to digest." So, skip the power lunch. Think that candy bar will be the antidote for the afternoon slump? Think again. "Refined sugar foods such as soda, candy, or low-fat/fat-free cookies wreak havoc with blood sugar levels," says Sass. The result is a quick burst of energy followed by an even lower energy slump. Continually choosing the quick fix puts you in a never-ending cycle of sugar rushes and energy crashes.

#### **What to Do:**

Eat frequently throughout the day and choose small meals and snacks over large meals. For an energizing way to start the day, Kate Geagan, MS, RD, nutrition consultant and owner of IT Nutrition, suggests this fast smoothie: blend together one cup of plain low-fat yogurt with half a cup of frozen berries and half a sliced banana. Add orange juice to get to the desired consistency. Sip this along with a handful of nuts and you'll start the day energized. Throughout the day, choose meals and snacks that combine protein, carbs, and fiber to pack in the most power. Examples include the following:

- Cottage cheese and fruit
- Hard cooked egg or tuna and whole grain crackers
- Nuts and dried fruit—such as cashews, almonds, walnuts, or peanuts with raisins, dried cranberries, or dried blueberries
- Veggie-filled salad topped with beans or sliced turkey
- Peanut butter and fruit or celery sticks
- Low-fat cheese and whole grain crackers

### **EATING FOR SLEEP**

#### **What Works:**

Turns out that warm milk, just as your mother may have told you, may be the right choice for a good night's slumber after all. Dairy foods are a good source of tryptophan, an amino acid. "Tryptophan helps make chemicals in the body to slow down nerve traffic and lull us into a restful sleep," according to Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, ADA spokesperson. Carbohydrate-rich foods such as whole wheat pasta, brown rice, and oatmeal are also good nighttime picks. Eating a complex carbohydrate with a meal or as a snack may help the body produce the chemical serotonin, which helps the body relax.

Not only are there foods that can help us catch some zzzz's,



certain beverages can be beneficial as well. According to Grotto, "Cherry juice is one of the few food sources of melatonin, a sleep hormone produced by the brain." And, Blatner explains, research has shown that chamomile tea contains phytochemicals that promote relaxation. In addition, hot drinks such as chamomile or other caffeine-free teas or warm milk help the body begin to unwind. It can be difficult to rush and gulp a mug of hot liquid. A drink that needs to be sipped slowly forces you to start to slow down.

#### **What Doesn't Work:**

Nighttime is also not the time to go overboard with a great deal of food. Big meals take longer to digest which can make trying to relax and fall asleep difficult. Stay away from "anything too spicy or overly gassy," warns Sass, as they may cause discomfort or indigestion that can keep you awake. This could include Mexican and Thai food or other foods prepared with hot chilies, for example, as well as large quantities of beans or cruciferous vegetables such as cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower, would be poor choices late in the evening. And if acidic foods tend to bother you, it's best to avoid them in the final hours before you go to bed. These include tomato sauce, bell peppers and citrus fruits such as oranges and grapefruits.

There are also drinks to avoid before going to bed—alcoholic beverages, for example, says Moores. "They may lead to drowsiness, but the sleep is more restless and wakeful."

And for the same reason you drink coffee in the morning—because it gives you an energizing jolt—you should avoid coffee and other caffeine-filled beverages in the evening if you're looking to get a good night's sleep.

#### **What to Do:**

Start the winding down process at dinner. Be sure to include a serving of complex carbohydrates in the meal. These include brown rice, whole grain pasta, and couscous. Also avoid caffeine and alcohol-containing drinks and instead sip on a mug of warm milk before bed. To flavor it up a bit Sally Kuzemchak, a registered dietitian from Columbus, Ohio, suggests adding a tablespoon of flavored syrup like those used in coffee shops—for example, vanilla, hazelnut, or peppermint. As a double whammy for an easier trip to dreamland, combine dairy foods and fiber-rich carbohydrates. Some ideas include the following:

- whole grain graham crackers with heated milk;
- a bowl of oatmeal prepared with low-fat milk;
- low-fat yogurt with some whole grain cereal mixed into it;
- low-fat yogurt with fruit.

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