

Eating Right for Sleep

(Excerpt from The Floppy Sleep Game Book, by Patti Teel)
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Food has a huge impact on a child's well-being. It can energize, increase hyperactivity, or induce fatigue. Just as a lack of sleep can jumble a child's thinking or cause learning problems, so can an inadequate diet. Each child is a unique individual, and it's unreasonable to think that "one size fits all" diet advice is realistic. Children seem to be born not only with an emotional temperament but with a food temperament. For instance, my son has always had a particular suspicion and aversion to any food that is green; however, he doesn't care much for sweets. In direct contrast, my youngest daughter has always loved vegetables and from the time she was a toddler, her favorite food was broccoli. Unfortunately, she also inherited my sweet tooth.

Diet is critical for children's health and everything that we eat affects us. However, it affects each of us a little differently, depending on our individual makeup and metabolism. For instance, some children are highly sensitive to sugar and any form of sweets in their diet. For them, sugar consumption can aggravate many problems such as hyperactivity, anxiety, nervousness, irritability, and poor concentration—all of which can lead to sleep difficulties.

We all know that children are healthier and sleep better if they eat a healthy diet containing a variety of foods from all the food groups. Unfortunately, some children can be incredibly picky. I don't think it's a good idea to cater to a child's every whim or to battle over food. Fill your house with healthy foods and snacks and don't get in the habit of buying junk food. That way, when your children are hungry, they will have no choice but to eat healthy and nutritious foods.

In addition, children are much more likely to be interested in eating meals that they have helped plan and prepare. Buy a healthy children's cookbook and have fun planning and preparing nutritious meals and snacks together.

Healthy Tips:

- Eat a variety of foods from all of the food groups.
- Drink a lot of water during the day; even slight dehydration can cause feelings of anxiety.
- Make sure your child gets enough calcium; it enhances the synthesis of serotonin, the chemical that induces feelings of well-being. Low levels of calcium can cause irritability and nervousness. Food sources include milk, yogurt, cheese, broccoli, sunflower seeds, carob and spinach.
- Eat organic foods as much as possible. (Many food additives can also be detrimental to sleep.)
- Eat more complex carbohydrates, rather than processed carbs. (Include raw fruits and vegetables.)
- Don't use sugary treats as a reward or to console a child when he or she is upset.

To Ensure a Good Nights Sleep

What you eat and when you eat can affect how you sleep. In the following section, I'll review the foods and bedtime snacks that are likely to help your child sleep and identify the foods that should be avoided.

- Avoid late afternoon or evening caffeine & sugar consumption. (Sodas are usually a huge source of both sugar and caffeine.)
- Eat foods rich in B vitamins: Sources of B vitamins include whole grains, legumes, organ meats, raw nuts and seeds, mushrooms, deep sea fish, eggs, meat and dark green vegetables.
- Eat foods rich in magnesium. Food sources include nuts, whole grains, sunflower seeds, legumes, whole grains, avocados and raisins.

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- Avoid eating dinner any later than three hours before bed if it seems to energize your child. (Eating too late at night raises the metabolic rate and energizes some children.)
- Have an evening bedtime snack that contains tryptophan. Tryptophan is an essential amino acid that the brain converts into the neurotransmitter, serotonin. Serotonin is then converted into melatonin, which assists in sleep. Many children find a glass of warm milk calming and it is a good source of tryptophan. Other sources of tryptophan include cottage cheese, yogurt, pineapples, plums, bananas, eggs, turkey, sesame seeds, sunflower seeds, cashews and peanuts. It's best to combine these tryptophan rich foods with complex carbohydrates like whole grain cereals, bread or potatoes; it helps the brain to absorb the tryptophan. Bedtime snack suggestions: whole grain cereal with milk, oatmeal with milk, peanut butter sandwich with ground sesame seeds, oatmeal cookies with milk.
- If your child has a bedtime snack, have it half an hour to an hour before bed.

Dubbed "The Dream Maker" by People magazine, Patti Teel is a former teacher and the creator of an award winning relaxation audio series for children. Her book, *The Floppy Sleep Game*, gives parents techniques to help their children relax, deal with stress and fall asleep. She is a popular speaker and presents innovative workshops for parents, children, and health professionals. Get R&R tips and sign up for her newsletter at www.pattiteel.com. You can listen to her online radio show at www.timeoutwithpattiteel.com.