NHS

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Foods for better sleep

Information for families



Outstanding Care for One+All

What is melatonin?

It is a hormone produced in the brain which regulates our sleep cycle. Melatonin levels increase in darkness and decrease when it's light. It helps you fall asleep faster and sleep deeper.

Why do we need melatonin?

A lack of sleep is not good for your health. It can affect your mood, energy levels, delay learning and can increase your risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and obesity. It can also disrupt hunger hormones, meaning you may end up eating more than you normally would.

Natural ways to improve your sleep

Melatonin is produced by the body, but it's also found in a variety of foods. These 7 foods are good sources of melatonin:

Nuts

Cashew nuts, almonds and pistachios contain a high amount of melatonin. Pistachios have the highest amount and are also high in vitamin B6. They are a great source of fibre and omega-3 fatty acids, which are linked to higher sleep quality and contain antioxidants too.

Fish

Fish is a better source of melatonin than other meats. The best options are oily fish like salmon and sardines, which also provide valuable omega-3 fatty acids

Tart cherries

Tart cherry juice is one of the best known sleep aids. Researchers have found that it increases melatonin levels in the body and enhances sleep. Cherry juice is high in sugar, so eating cherries instead of drinking their juice is a healthier way of absorbing melatonin.

Goji berries

Produced by a plant native to China, goji berries are high in melatonin and may improve sleep.

Milk

Warm milk is a traditional remedy for insomnia, as it is high in melatonin. It could be a good option if you tolerate dairy.

Mushrooms

All mushrooms are rich in melatonin and contain tryptophan. They are also great sources of protein, fibre, and antioxidants.

Sweetcorn

Sweetcorn can be eaten as corn on the cob, popcorn, or cornbread, or added to salads, soups, or casseroles.

Bananas

Bananas contain melatonin, tryptophan, vitamin B6, and magnesium, which are all great for producing serotonin and helping you sleep. Bananas can not only help you sleep but also feel more alert during the day. This is because bananas contain complex carbohydrates, which can give you energy all day long.

Eggs

Among animal products, eggs are one of the best sources of melatonin. Eggs are also highly nutritious, offering protein and iron, among other essential nutrients.

General tips

- Eat melatonin-rich foods in the evening, preferably 2 to 3 hours before bedtime.
- Avoid foods and drinks that can interfere with melatonin production or sleep quality, such as caffeine, alcohol, sugar, spicy foods, and processed foods.
- Limit your exposure to blue light from electronic devices, such as TVs, computers, and smartphones. Blue light can suppress your melatonin production and keep you awake. Use dim lights, curtains, or eye masks to create a dark and cosy environment for sleep.
- Expose yourself to natural light during the day, especially in the morning. Natural light can help increase melatonin production. Head outdoors, open your windows, or use a light therapy device to get some sunshine.

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