

## LIFESTYLES WITH SYLVIA



Dear Friends,

Happy 2010 everyone! During the holiday season I received a card with such a positive and hopeful message that I just had to share it with you: "Give thanks for unknown blessings already on their way." I don't know about you, but I really like the sound of that! So as we move forward into a new year, may we all be blessed with good health, lasting love, bountiful happiness and a more peaceful world.

Now, down to business!

One of my readers recently asked me to devote a column to the relationship between sleep and the food we eat. Since I'm sure we've all experienced trouble sleeping at one point or another, I'm thrilled to tackle the subject. Read on and hopefully you'll all come away with a few helpful hints for a more restful slumber.

### **Sleep: A "Mind-Body" Experience**

Having trouble sleeping? If so, don't be too hard on yourself. After all, while the act of sleeping may seem simple enough, from a physiological standpoint it's quite a complicated event.

Sleep is related to many factors that cut across the "mind-body" spectrum. In other words, our bodies and our brains both affect what happens when we turn in for the night. The role our mind plays in sleep is most obvious when our worries, anxiety or confusion stop us from falling a sleep altogether. At the same time however, nutrition influences our shuteye as well, so while we can't overlook the psychological factors, we must always pay attention to the way we eat if our goal is a satisfying night's sleep.

### **Patterns and Timing Make a Difference**

Believe it or not, when we eat can be just as important as what we eat. So speaking of timing, do you often find yourself eating late at night? If your answer is yes, here's a much-needed wake up call (no pun intended): having a large meal within two hours of bedtime is a guaranteed prescription for a bad night's sleep.

Why? Because a large meal revs up your entire system: your circulatory system moves blood into our digestive tract, your stomach secretes gastric acid, your pancreas produces digestive enzymes... and that's only the beginning! In short, while you're getting ready for bed, your body is just starting to wake up. To top it all off, our digestive tracts are set up to work best when we are in an upright position, so your body needs to work even harder to digest that late meal once you're tucked in for the night.

Still not convinced? Here's some more food for thought: when it comes down to it, we eat because our bodies need the energy. The nutrients released from the food we eat keep us going hours after that meal has been eaten, which is why the best time for your largest meal of the day is before your most physically demanding part of the day. Sleep, on the other hand, is the least physically demanding part of the day, and therefore the least logical time for a meal is right before going to bed.

So how should you handle those late night hunger pangs? A small snack in the hour before bed is usually not a problem if you're truly hungry, but the ideal solution is to time your last meal so you won't feel hungry during the one to two hours before hitting the sack.

### **Food Stimulants**

Some food components, such as caffeine, artificially wake us up, so it makes no sense to consume foods that contain stimulants before bed. Eliminating all caffeine-rich foods, such as chocolate, soda, certain teas and brewed coffee, from your evening meal can greatly improve the quality of your sleep. In addition, alcohol has also been shown to interfere with sleep, so try cutting out that beer or glass of wine as well.

### **Food, Sleep and Exercise**

You may not realize it, but exercise can help regulate your sleep just as much as it can help regulate your appetite. Sure, a long day can leave you mentally exhausted, but if you're not physically exhausted as well, your body may not be ready for a good night's sleep. In other words, food, sleep and exercise are three components of our lives that are meant to work together, so for a healthy sleep try to plan your days so they include the other two components as well.

### **Planning the Perfect Evening Meal**

By now I know what you're thinking: "What should I eat to help me sleep?" First of all, not too much! After all, it's important that your body focus on rest and repair while you sleep rather than on digestion. So keeping quantity in mind, your evening meal should:

- Emphasize low-to-medium glycemic index carbohydrates, such as whole-grain breads, rice, or pasta, yams, a mixed green salad or lightly sautéed vegetables.
- Include a small portion of a healthy fat-containing food, such as olive oil, avocado or nuts or seeds or their oils or butters.

- Include herbal tea (especially chamomile or peppermint) or other non-stimulating water-based beverage (my personal favorite: a cup of steaming hot water).
- Include only fresh, dried or cooked fruit for dessert, if dessert is desired.

Like I've said before, "when" is just as important as "what," so your evening meal should be eaten about four hours before bedtime. This way your body's main digestive work will be complete by the time your head hits the pillow.

If you absolutely need to eat a snack before bedtime, choose one or two of the following:

- A small cup of herb tea or warm milk (soy, nut or dairy), but not so much that you'll have to get up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night
- A small serving of fresh or dried fruit
- A small handful of raw nuts or seeds

### **Good Nights (and Days) in 2010**

If you've had trouble sleeping in the past, I hope some of the suggestions in this column will help you make the most out of your forty winks. After all, sleep is a vital component of overall health and happiness, a condition we should all strive to achieve. And as we dive headfirst into this brand new decade, remember that you can achieve it if you're just willing to take an honest look at what's standing in your way and resolve to overcome it, whether it's the quality of your sleep or one of the other countless challenges we all face on a day-to-day basis.

True, sometimes it can be hard to go it alone... so don't! Reach out and ask for help. Turn to a friend or seek out a trained professional who can help you identify the changes you need to make to achieve your goals. And then dare to do it! If not now, when, right?

Here's wishing you a life-changing 2010, and when in doubt, remember: give thanks for unknown blessings already on their way...

Until next time, happy healthful eating,

*Sylvia*

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