

## 2 News Briefs

- Partial radiation treatment for breast cancer patients.
- Daily weighing could increase weight-loss success.
- Poor heart function may contribute to Alzheimer's disease.

## 3 Changing Bad Habits

Learn the three Rs and transform bad habits into healthier ones.

## 4 Greens to Envy

Dark green leafy vegetables protect seniors from many common diseases.

## 5 Stand Up to Healthy Feet

These steps keep your soles strong, healthy, and pain free.

## 6 Great Wall Workouts

Four easy at-home exercises to help you stay fit and active.

## 7 Sleepy Foods

These choices can make you fall asleep faster.

## 8 Ask Dr. Ferrell

- How many nuts should I eat?
- Is it okay to take aspirin for heart attack prevention?
- How do I prevent kidney stones?

# Say good night to poor sleep

*Prepare your body, life, and environment to enjoy the best sleep possible.*

A good night's sleep is one of the best gifts you can give your health. And lack of proper slumber can be one of the greatest threats to your health. You may spend one-third of your life asleep, but to ensure the other two-thirds are healthy, you need to enhance your nightly shut-eye.

"A combination of factors can affect your sleep," says Alon Avidan, MD, MPH, director of the UCLA Sleep Disorders Center. "Some are related to advancing age and medical factors like pain or medication, which disrupt your normal circadian rhythm, or sleep/wake cycle, and cause insomnia or sleepiness. Yet, lifestyle and environmental factors, which you can control, often have the greatest influence on healthy sleep."

Here, then, are some changes you can make during the day to ensure your nights are more restful.

### Avoid unnatural light

Exposure to light from electronic devices can delay the release of melatonin, which naturally occurs around 9 p.m. (Melatonin is a hormone secreted by the pineal gland in the brain that maintains the circadian rhythm.) A Harvard-sponsored study found that exposure to blue light from TV and computer screens can suppress melatonin production and throw off your circadian rhythm by about three hours.

Light pollution at night makes it more difficult to fall asleep during the beginning of your normal sleep/wake cycle and delays your natural ability to fall asleep.

"Set a cutoff time and avoid looking at

*Proper sleep slows memory decline and lowers your risk of stroke.*



electronic screens two to three hours before bedtime," says Dr. Avidan.

Your bedroom lamps are no help, either. They also can interfere with a person's circadian rhythm and melatonin secretion. A 2011 study found that exposure to room light before bedtime suppressed melatonin, resulting in a later melatonin onset in 99 percent of subjects.

Correct this by exposing yourself to natural sunlight during the day—outside and not just through an open win-

dow—for about 30 minutes, says Dr. Avidan. Also, use dim red lights for night-lights as they have the least power to shift circadian rhythms.

### Get active

Regular physical activities, such as walking, aerobics, biking, gardening, golfing, and yoga, are associated with better sleep habits compared to doing nothing, according to a 2015 study from the University of Pennsylvania.

But make sure you choose the right kind. Activities like household chores led to poorer sleep quality, the researchers found, perhaps because they are demanding and stressful and often done later in the day, too close to bedtime. "It is probably ideal to avoid vigorous exercise within three hours of bedtime," says Dr. Avidan. "Moderate exercise is best at least six hours before bedtime, but research is still needed to tell us exactly who may or may not benefit from exercise before bedtime."

*Continued on page 7*

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## NEWS BRIEFS

**Partial radiation treatment found most beneficial to breast cancer patients**

A new study by UCLA scientists found that women with breast cancer who were treated with a one-week regimen of partial breast radiation after the surgical removal of the tumor saw no increase in cancer recurrence compared to women who received radiation of the entire breast for up to six weeks.

The one-week treatment—known as accelerated partial breast irradiation with interstitial multicatheter brachytherapy—works by radiating only breast tissue in and around the area where the tumor was removed. While the current whole-breast therapy is well tolerated overall, and is a viable choice for women after a lumpectomy, the big advantage of the partial breast approach is that it allows a higher dose per treatment in a smaller area. This way women can complete all of the treatments within a week instead of the usual three to six weeks, says lead researcher Mitchell Kamrava, MD, of the Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center. Shorter treatments also limit radiation exposure to normal tissues like the remaining breast, as well as the heart and lungs. The ideal candidate is still being explored, but Dr. Kamrava says, in general, she would be age 50 and older with tumors smaller than three centimeters, and no chemotherapy prior to surgery. “Women should discuss this treatment option with their doctors,” he says.

**Daily weighing may improve weight-loss success**

A simple strategy may help you lose weight: Step on a scale each day and track the results. A two-year study from Cornell University found that regular self-weighing, and monitoring the results on a chart, were effective for both losing weight and keeping it off. In the study, 80 subjects were given a goal of one percent weight loss using any weight-loss method they chose. Once they maintained that weight loss for 10 days, they were given a new target to lose another one percent, and so on, with the ultimate goal to lose 10 percent of their original body weight. The group of men and women used either a research website to record their weight or a scale that automatically sent the results to the website. Most weighed themselves at least four times each week. The researchers found that those who weighed themselves and kept track of the results were most successful. The weighing-recording method forced the people to be more aware of the connection between diet and weight, says lead researcher David Levitsky, PhD. “It acts as a reinforcement for healthy behaviors, like eating less and monitoring calorie intake and exercising more.” Previous advice downplayed daily weighing because it could have a negative impact on weight-loss efforts since the natural daily variation in weight due to shifts in water balance could be discouraging. “But keeping a chart shows trends in weight, which can be more encouraging,” says Dr. Levitsky. Another advantage of the daily weighing: Those who lost weight in the first year were able to maintain it into the second year when they continued their daily weighing. “Studies have shown that about 40 percent of weight loss is regained in one year, and this method may be a means to prevent that.”

**Poor heart function could increase risk for Alzheimer’s disease and dementia**

A recent study in *Circulation* found a link between heart function and the development of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. The research examined more than 1,000 participants from the Framingham Heart Study and discovered that those with decreased heart function—indicated by cardiac index—were two to three times more likely to have significant memory loss. Cardiac index measures the amount of blood that leaves the heart and is pumped through the body. A low index value means there is less blood leaving the heart. Science has long associated heart health and brain health, but this highlights the role of cardiac index as a risk factor. The average brain accounts for two percent of overall body weight, but receives as much as 15 percent of the blood leaving the heart, explains lead researcher Angela Jefferson, PhD. However, as people age, the blood vessels become weaker and less healthy, and thus less adaptable to blood flow changes. This means the brain may not receive adequate blood supply, which may affect brain health and function. While there is no proven way to prevent dementia or Alzheimer’s disease, Dr. Jefferson believes that improving heart health could be a means to prevent or delay declining brain function. ■

# Changing Bad Habits into Good Ones

*The three Rs—Reminder, Routine, and Reward—can help identify triggers and create healthier habits.*

Everyone has bad habits, but instead of scolding yourself for being helpless to break them, use them to your advantage. “A bad habit paints a clear picture of your behavior,” says Gary Small, MD, director of the UCLA Center on Aging. “By breaking down the cycle of your bad habit, you can identify the routine and triggers, and begin to address what really needs to change.”

## The three Rs of habit change

Every habit, good or bad, follows the same three-step pattern, according to researchers. They are the three Rs:

- ① **Reminder:** trigger that initiates the behavior
- ② **Routine:** behavior, or action, you take
- ③ **Reward:** benefit from the behavior

Each one is linked to the others in a continuous loop. For example, say you have a habit of eating cookies or chips when you watch TV at night.

This is the loop: Your 8 p.m. TV show begins (reminder), you go to the kitchen to gather your snack foods (routine) and eat them while you watch your program (reward).

When the reward is achieved and is positive—in this case eating comfort food—you have a desire to repeat the action with the next reminder, and the cycle begins again.

The simple solution would be to just stop eating the junk food. But, of course, it is never that easy, especially when the snacking may not even be the real issue.

## Diagnose the routine

Your first step to changing your bad habit is to examine the routine. In this example, it is the act of visiting the kitchen for the snack foods



and then getting comfortable on the couch. Now ask yourself, why do you go to the kitchen? Make a list of short words or phrases that describe your feelings when you follow the routine. Hunger? Boredom? The satisfaction of eating while you watch?

## Experiment with rewards

Next, make a list of different types of rewards other than junk food. The goal is not to “punish” yourself from seeking pleasure, but to find other rewards with equal satisfaction.

Focus on items or actions that you enjoy. These may include taking a walk or calling a friend, or involve different kinds of satisfying snacks like fruit, yogurt, or a cup of hot tea.

## Find your triggers

Research has found that habitual triggers fit into one of five categories: Location, Time, Emotional State, Other People, and Immediately Preceding Action. In the TV-watching scenario, a typical loop may look like this:

- ➔ Location (living room)
- ➔ Time (8 p.m.)
- ➔ Emotional state (bored)
- ➔ Other People (alone)
- ➔ Immediately Preceding Action (favorite TV show comes on)

You want to record your situation using these categories for three to five days, as some may vary (for instance, mood, time, and/or specific TV show).

Afterwards, review the information and look for patterns. For instance, maybe you snack only when you are alone, or when you watch TV later at night or when you are in a certain mood. Or you follow the routine of snacking only when you watch TV, or certain shows like a comedy or drama. Do you tend to favor certain foods, like cookies, over other choices? These are the areas where you want to implement change.

## Make a plan

Once you have examined your routine, the reminder that triggers your behavior, and the reward that satisfies the habit, you can create a strategy to support where change should occur and break the cycle.

For example, instead of watching TV at the same time every night, use that time to do other rewards like exercise, read, or participate in a hobby.

“This may be the release you need from your day instead of watching TV, which can trigger the urge to snack,” says Dr. Small.

Or you may find your snacking is triggered only when you watch TV later at night. In that case, record your shows and watch them earlier. Still, you may discover that it’s not the snack food you crave, but rather the act of eating while you enjoy a show, so you could prepare healthier snacks to satisfy that urge.

“It may take some time, and you may have to experiment with different rewards or try different triggers to find the right ones, but eventually you can change your bad habit into something more positive,” says Dr. Small.

You can use this formula for any habit you wish to change. Once you know how the cycle of habits work, you have more power to make lasting change. ■



## The bright side of dark green leafy vegetables

*These often ignored foods offer some of the best protection against common age-related diseases.*

*The darker the color of green leafy vegetables, the more vital nutrients they contain.*

**M**ost people tend to walk past the dark green leafy vegetables at the grocery store. After all, what can you do with

them? But seniors should stock up on these vibrant and vitamin-rich foods.

“Research has shown that dark green leafy vegetables may provide some of the best benefits for an aging body and mind,” says Dana Hunnes, PhD, RD, senior nutritionist with the UCLA Medical Center.

“Additionally, they are easy to prepare, both in their cooked and raw forms, and there are many ways you can use them, from salads to side vegetables to flavorful additions to everyday meals.”

The family of dark green leafy vegetables includes spinach, kale, collards, mustard greens, beet greens, broccoli, and lettuces, such as romaine, arugula, butterhead, and red leaf. And the darker the green, the higher the number of nutrients. Most share the same vitamins and minerals vital for healthy aging: Vitamins A, C, and K, bone-building calcium, and iron to help carry oxygen to the blood.

They also contain high levels of folate, a nutrient your body cannot make, which can help prevent certain types of anemia (fatigue caused by lack of red blood cells), which are more common as people age.

### Better heart and brain health

Dark leafy greens also play a key role in perhaps the two most crucial areas of senior health: the heart and brain.

**HEART:** “As we age, our blood vessels lose some of their elasticity, but potassium, found in many green leafy vegetables, can help with this,” says Dr. Hunnes. “This is important to lower the detrimental effects of both hypertension and cardiovascular disease.”

Another key ingredient in green leafy vegetables is lutein, part of the carotenoid family, which has been shown to reduce the thickening of arteries. In one study, researchers studied 480 men and women who had no history of heart disease and looked at the thickness of their carotid arteries—which supply the head and neck with oxygenated blood—and the levels of lutein in their blood.

They found that those with the highest levels of lutein had less thickening of their arteries compared with those with low levels. Carotid artery thickness is a good indication of atherosclerosis throughout the body, which leads to most heart attacks and strokes.

**BRAIN:** New research has, for the first time, linked vitamin K consumption, and in particular from dark green leafy vegetables, to slower cognitive decline and a possible protection against Alzheimer’s disease and dementia.

Researchers recently tracked the diets of more than 950 older adults (with an average age of 81) for five years. They discovered a significant decrease in the rate of cognitive decline among those who consumed the highest amounts of these types of vegetables.

In fact, people who ate one to two servings per day had the cognitive ability of a person 11 years younger than those who consumed none.

### Greens you should envy

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends eating at least one-half cup of dark green leafy vegetables each day.

There are many ways to get your daily intake beyond the salad bowl and sandwich bread. Here are some suggestions for the more common ones from Dr. Hunnes:

➔ **Kale:** Rub the leaves in olive oil and garlic and bake at 375 degrees for 15 minutes. Before cooking, swish the greens in a water-filled sink until the leaves are free of dirt.

➔ **Collards:** While the traditional way to cook collards involves a ham hock, which is quite high in sodium, a healthier way is to sauté collards. Place a tablespoon of olive oil in a pan on medium heat. Add a thinly sliced or minced garlic clove and the collards. Sauté for five minutes, then cover and let sit until the greens are soft, wilted, and tender.

➔ **Swiss chard:** Prepare the same way as collards— sauté with garlic and olive oil.

➔ **Spinach:** Cooked offers more nutrition than raw, as heat reduces its oxalate content, freeing up its dietary calcium. Heat two tablespoons of olive oil, add three sliced garlic cloves, and sauté until brown.

Add spinach and use a spatula to lift and turn over the spinach several times. Cover and cook for two minutes or until wilted. Freeze leftovers and add them straight to soups, pasta dishes, and casseroles.

➔ **Broccoli:** Cut into small chunks or florets. Drizzle with two tablespoons of olive oil, and some cracked black pepper. (You may also splash with a tablespoon of balsamic vinegar mixed with one teaspoon of maple syrup.) Mix in a bowl, spread on a baking pan, and bake at 375 degrees for 30 to 45 minutes until crispy, yet fork-tender. ■

# Stand up to healthier feet

Take these steps to keep your feet strong and pain free.

Your feet are not just the foundation for your body, but your life, too. “Without strong, healthy feet, you cannot stay mobile and enjoy an active and vibrant life as you age,” says Brendan Riley, DPM, with UCLA Health.

Foot issues that often plague people age 50 and older include plantar fasciitis, bunions, and regular, everyday soreness. Most of the time, these problems are self-inflicted due to poor footwear choices or lack of proper foot fitness. Yet with the right steps, you can remedy and avoid these issues and keep your feet happy, healthy, and moving forward.

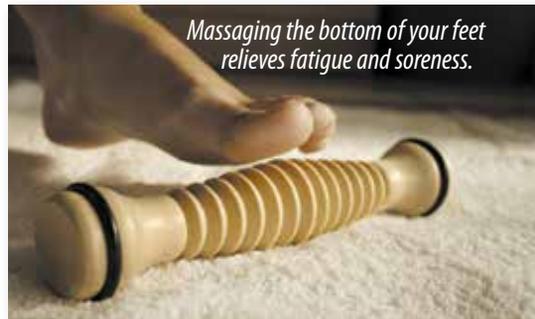
## Plantar fasciitis

The most common cause of foot and heel pain, plantar fasciitis occurs when the band of tissue (the plantar fascia) that extends from the heel to the toes becomes inflamed. This often is caused by general overuse, but weak calf muscles also contribute. “These muscles act like shock absorbers when you walk, and when they become tight and inflexible, your body compensates and places more stress on your feet,” says Dr. Riley.

➔ **FIX IT:** Calf raises can improve calf strength and flexibility. With your feet shoulder-width apart use a wall or chair for support and rise up on your toes and hold for five to 10 seconds. Lower and repeat five to 10 times.

Another source of plantar fasciitis, especially for women, is choices of footwear. Wearing high heels on a regular basis can cause the Achilles tendon to constantly contract, which can cause tension on the plantar fasciitis when you take off your shoes, according to Dr. Riley.

➔ **FIX IT:** The ideal shoe should have a low heel—nothing over two to two-and-one-half inches, with some arch support, a wide forefoot to keep the toes from bunching together, and a



rubber sole for support. A well-fitting walking or running shoe works best. You should wear them any time you will be on your feet for long durations.

Visit a podiatrist or running store to have your arch measured and gait evaluated to determine your pronation—whether your foot rolls inward or outward or is neutral. “This can help find the appropriate size and arch support for your shoes, which can reduce stress on the bottom of your feet,” says Dr. Riley.

## Bunions

Another common ailment is bunions—a visible bump on the side of the foot near the base of the big toe. This is caused by the misalignment of bones in the foot. More than one in five adults suffer from bunions, and up to two-thirds will develop one in their lifetime.

As bunions progress, they can become sore and inflamed, which makes walking difficult. Bunions are often hereditary, but wearing shoes with a too-narrow toe box that bunches the toes together is a more likely reason. Overtime, this cramping causes the big toe to lean inward and changes the angle of the bones until it produces its tell-tale bump.

➔ **FIX IT:** Shoes with a wider toe box can help reduce pressure and lessen pain. Another remedy is rubber toe separators placed between the big and second toe, which helps to straighten the big toe.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

Tips to support healthy soles:

- **Visit** your podiatrist or running store to have your arches and gait measured to ensure you wear the right sized shoe.
- **Perform** regular calf raises to protect against plantar fasciitis.
- **Avoid** shoes with too-wide boxes, which can irritate bunions.
- **Massage** bottoms of feet regularly to ease fatigue and soreness.
- **Skip** the pedicure. The cuticles can get cut, which increases risk of infections.

Even though bunions can be unsightly, it is rare they cause lasting problems, says Dr. Riley. Doctors do not recommend bunion surgery for cosmetic reasons, but only if the pain becomes so severe it interferes with daily activities. If you do have surgery, the recovery period can take up to six to eight weeks, depending on your age, previous mobility, and pain tolerance.

## Soreness

Staying off your feet for a while often is all you need to recover from everyday foot fatigue. For more intense pain or soreness, apply an ice pack to the sore area for 10 to 20 minutes, three to four times a day, which can help to reduce inflammation. “If the pain does not go away in a few days, you should have it looked at by your doctor,” says Dr. Riley.

➔ **FIX IT:** You can also take steps at home to strengthen and protect your feet. Go barefoot whenever possible to allow your feet to move in their natural state. Massage your soles by rolling a golf ball, tennis ball, or similar massage tool under the ball of your foot and then up and down the arch to help relieve cramps and ease fatigue. Ankle circles also can keep your feet flexible and prevent stumbles. Rotate your feet in a circle 10 times, and then repeat in the opposite direction. ■

# The great wall of workouts

*Having trouble staying active? These four wall exercises can get you moving in the comfort of your home.*

Seniors can have trouble staying fit as they age, from finding time to visit a gym to maintaining motivation to facing physical barriers like injury recovery or surgery.

If this is you, the solution may be as close as the next room. “Using just a wall and your body weight, seniors can perform many basic exercises that can help them navigate around any physical limits and build strength, improve posture, and increase mobility and balance,” says Daniel Salazar, PT, with UCLA Health. “Many are easy to perform, can be modified as needed, and create a solid fitness foundation from which to grow.”

## 1 Strength

The basic push-up is one of the simplest and most effective upper body exercises, as it addresses multiple muscle groups and joints in one movement, like the chest, biceps, shoulders, and back. However, push-ups can be difficult if you are a beginner and/or lack upper body strength.

➔ **At the wall:** A Wall Push-Up can lower the amount of body weight you have to lift by 25 to 50 percent, and reduce pressure on the shoulder joints, says Salazar. “This allows you to do the exercise with proper form, which engages muscles longer, and also allows you to complete more repetitions.” You can place your feet farther away from the wall to increase the resistance as you become stronger.

## 2 Balance

Strong calf muscles create the bedrock you need for good balance. A study from Indiana University found that five weeks of exercises that strengthened the calf muscles, and the muscles just below it, improved the balance of adults ages 80 to 90 by almost 20 percent.

➔ **At the wall:** Using a wall for support, a Calf Stretch allows you to hold the stretch longer. Stand with your arms extended straight out at shoulder level, hands pressing against the wall. Take a step back with your left foot. Press into the heel of your right foot as you bend your left leg. Hold the stretch for 10 to 30 seconds. Switch legs and repeat.

## 3 Mobility

Strong quads can help with up and down movement and walking endurance as well as the ability to squat and climb stairs. Simple squats are one of the best quad-building exercises, but can place extra strain on the hips and knees.

➔ **At the wall:** Wall Squats can relieve this pressure. Stand with your back flat against the wall for support and slide downward into a semi-squat position, knees not quite parallel,

while maintaining contact with the wall. “You don’t have to go down far either in order to execute the movement, and the wall ensures proper alignment,” says Salazar.

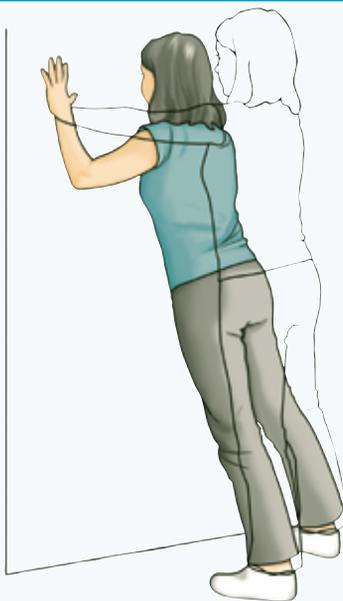
## 4 Posture

Regular upper body stretching can keep your back and shoulder joints flexible enough to maintain a natural alignment and healthy posture.

➔ **At the wall:** With the Wall Walk, you place your hand flat on the wall at shoulder height and then slowly crawl up the wall until you feel a stretch in the shoulder, arm, and torso. “It also increases shoulder flexibility to allow you to reach items on a high shelf or under the bed without discomfort, and reduces your risk of strain and injury,” says Salazar.

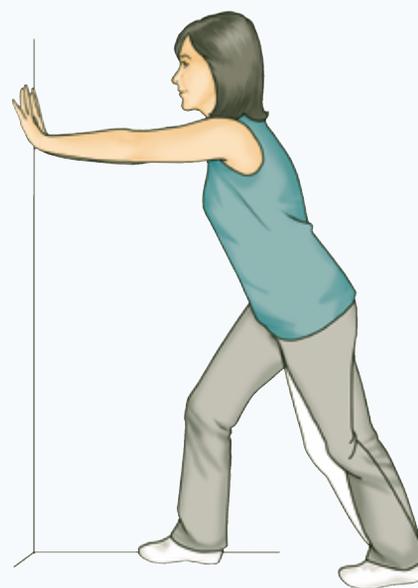
The number of repetitions and sets for these wall exercises vary depending on your current fitness level, but two sets of five to 10 reps, with rest in between, is a good starting point, says Salazar. As with any fitness program, check with your doctor beforehand, especially if you have specific limitations or are recovering from surgery. ■

### 1. STRENGTH



WALL PUSH-UP

### 2. BALANCE



CALF STRETCH

Sleep—cont. from page 1

### Set up a bedtime routine

Stop all evening activities at least an hour beforehand to give your body time to wind down. Brush your teeth, wash your face, and put on your favorite pajamas.

### Eliminate clutter

Remove piles of clothes, reduce that bedside stack of magazines and books to just one of each, and get rid of electronics, including TVs. “The more stimuli you can eliminate, the better,” says Dr. Avidan. Mirrors can make rooms feel bigger and brighter; they also can be a distraction at night because reflections can be quite activating. Place curtains over mirrored closet doors so they can be “closed” at night.

### Find the perfect temperature

Studies have found that, in general, the optimal temperature for sleep is between 60 to 68 degrees. When you go to sleep, the body temperature drops, which induces sleep. A lower temperature makes this easier to happen, but if it’s too hot, or even too

cold, your body struggles to maintain this ideal sleeping temperature, and you are more likely to awaken.

### Wake up with the sun

Your body is designed to wake up gradually with the rising sun and not to be jarred awake by a beeping alarm. Dawn simulators are tabletop machines that recreate a natural sunrise by slowly increasing the intensity of light in your room. (You can find dawn simulators at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).)

### How much sleep do you need?

The right amount of slumber sometimes varies based on the individual—some need more, some need less. “We know there is a myth out there that older adults need less sleep,” says Dr. Avidan. “Yet the inability to maintain good quality sleep is why seniors often sleep less, and not because they need fewer hours.”

New guidelines from the National Sleep Foundation suggest seven to eight hours of sleep for most adults age 65 and older. In fact, sleeping less than this amount—and much

## SLEEPY FOODS

*These foods can promote a sound slumber:*

- **Bananas:** Packed with potassium and magnesium, nutrients that double as natural muscle relaxants.
- **Milk:** Rich in the amino acid tryptophan, which turns into melatonin in the brain.
- **Cherries:** One of the only natural sources of melatonin. Choose from fresh, dried, or juice.
- **Tea:** Contains theanine, an amino acid that promotes sleep. Stick with decaf.
- **Oatmeal:** Full of sleep-promoting nutrients like calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, silicon, and potassium.
- **Jasmine Rice:** A high glycemic food that studies suggest increases ratio of tryptophan in the blood. Eat four hours before bedtime.

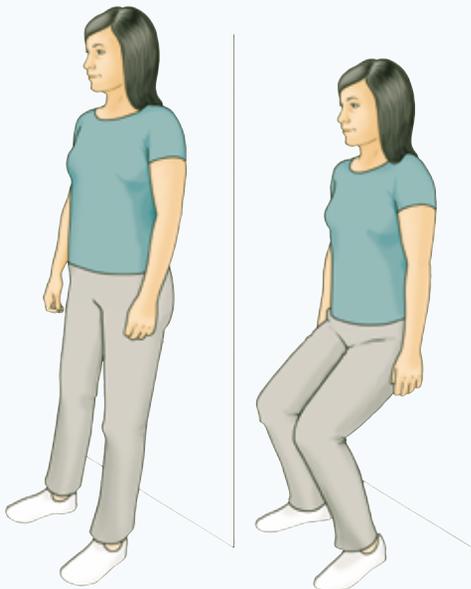
more—actually may increase your risk for various health problems.

Findings from research in *The Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (May 2014) showed that women age 70 and older who slept, on average, five or fewer hours, or nine or more hours, had poorer recall than those who slept an average of seven hours. Also, the group’s poorer recall was equal to almost two additional years of age.

A study from the University of Cambridge reported that older people doubled their risk of stroke when they consistently slept for more than eight hours compared with those whose sleep duration fell between six and eight hours.

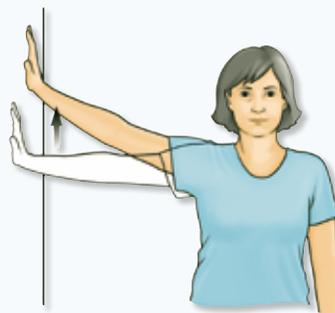
“But you may not need to be worried if you only sleep for six-and-one-half hours some nights, and don’t feel sleepy the next day,” says Dr. Avidan. “Sleep is not like a bank account where you build up hours and then make withdrawals. You can’t sleep less one night and make up the difference the next night. You want a steady average of about seven to eight hours per night.” ■

### 3. MOBILITY



WALL SQUAT

### 4. POSTURE



WALL WALK



Editor-in-Chief  
Bruce A. Ferrell,  
MD, Professor of  
Medicine and  
Geriatrics

**Q** Nuts are supposed to be healthy, but aren't they high in fat? How much should I eat, and which ones are the best?

**A** Both claims happen to be true. Nuts are indeed high in fat, but a great portion of the fat is unsaturated, a far better choice for your health than saturated fat. For example, unsalted walnuts have about 15 grams of polyunsaturated fat and only two grams of saturated. Polyunsaturated fat contains essential omega-3 and omega-6 amino acids, which the body cannot produce itself. Polyunsaturated fat in the diet also helps lower LDL (bad) cholesterol. A recent study by Vanderbilt University found that a diet high in nuts can lower your risk of total mortality as well as your risk of death from cardiovascular disease. In addition to walnuts, other good choices are peanuts, almonds, hazelnuts, pecans, and macadamia nuts. They should all be unsalted, and either raw or dry roasted rather than cooked in oil. However, keep in mind that although nuts are a healthy snack, they are still quite high in calories. A little goes a long way. For example, a 2/3 cup (a palm full) ranges from 553 calories for cashews to 718 calories for macadamia nuts. This is why the American Heart Association (AHA) recommends you eat no more than four servings of nuts per week, to help keep your total fat calories in check.

**Q** I keep hearing that aspirin can help with heart attack prevention. Is it okay to take every day?

**A** Aspirin is a type of blood thinner known as an antiplatelet drug. As such, it prevents blood cells, or platelets, from clumping together or forming a clot. Blood clots can block blood flow to the heart, causing a heart attack, or the brain, causing a stroke. But by no means should you begin an aspirin regimen of any kind without first consulting your physician. Regular use of aspirin carries

risks of internal bleeding or serious irritation to the digestive tract. You also may have a medical condition, such as kidney or liver disease, for which aspirin could pose a real danger. Aspirin also can alter the effectiveness of some medications, such as corticosteroids. With all that said, the practice of taking a daily low-dose aspirin is quite common and followed by approximately seven out of 10 Americans who have had a stroke or have heart disease. The AHA recommends that those at high risk for a heart attack, or anyone who previously suffered a heart attack, take one low-dose aspirin every day. But again, consult your doctor.

**Q** My friend constantly battles kidney stones. What are the best ways to prevent them from happening to me?

**A** Kidney stones are quite common and affect up to 3 million Americans each year. They are composed of accumulated minerals and salts that crystallize together. These tiny "stones" can form in your system unnoticed until one begins to "pass" from the kidney to the bladder and lodges in the ureter. These episodes can be extremely painful and sometimes require surgery to resolve. Some risk factors you cannot control, such as being white, a male, or having a family history of kidney stones. However, there are a few steps you can take to avoid them or reduce your risk. First, keep your body well hydrated by drinking at least six to eight glasses of water a day. This can help disrupt the mineral crystallization that forms the stones. Second, watch your diet. Excess salt, sugar, and animal protein all raise your risk. Next, control your weight, as the higher your body mass index (BMI), the higher your risk for kidney stones. (BMI is a snapshot look at healthy weight. You can calculate your BMI at [www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/lose\\_wt/BMI/bmicalc.htm](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/lose_wt/BMI/bmicalc.htm).) Finally, talk with your doctor about the medications you take to determine if they may increase your risk. ■

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