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## TCM: Insomnia

**I occasionally have trouble sleeping. What foods does TCM recommend?**

Insomnia can occur for many reasons, including stress, health problems and change of lifestyle. Eating properly will help achieve overall health and improve your ability to get a restful sleep. Since some foods promote sleep while others may affect it, you need to pay attention to what you eat.

Firstly, follow the general guidelines such as avoiding a heavy meal before bedtime. Those with weak stomachs should limit the amount of fatty and spicy foods consumed. Caffeine is a stimulant that keeps you awake, as does smoking. Pay attention to foods with flavour enhancers or preservatives if your body is sensitive to these ingredients. Don't go to bed with a full bladder.

TCM views insomnia as a manifestation of a *shen* (spirit) disorder that is accompanied with a heart disharmony because the heart is the "residence of the spirit". Food and herbs that nourish the heart calm the mind and ease insomnia. Foods that can help include longan aril, jujube seed, mulberry, reishi mushroom, lotus seed, lily bulb, wheat and barley.

People under emotional stress usually have an overactive mind. They have to ease a stagnated liver and smooth chi (vital energy) flow to encourage body and mind to sleep. Recommended foods include oranges, celery, chrysanthemum and dried tangerine peel/pith. Frozen and sour-flavoured foods impede the chi flow of the body, and should be consumed sparingly.

Mentally demanding jobs and prolonged stress also exhaust the fundamental substances of the body, which lead to under-nourishment and worsen the severity of insomnia. Wolfberry, carrot, spinach, animal liver, lychees, red dates, grapes, meat and fish, mushrooms and ginseng can be used to replenish the storage of chi and blood. Since people who have trouble sleeping are also likely to have digestive problems, eating Chinese yam, red dates, poria, lotus seed, hyacinth bean and hawthorn fruit is a good idea.

Elderly people tend to wake often and early due to poor circulation of the blood as well as atherosclerosis. Foods that help to lower blood lipids and blood pressure are seaweed, onion, mushrooms, garlic, lotus leaf and hawthorn fruit. Herbs such as cassia seed, achyranthes root and chrysanthemum are recommended to make medicinal dishes to improve brain function.

People can react differently to the same food, so experiment and learn your own "trigger" foods that prevent you from sleeping.

In the evening, a cup of herbal tea can release tension and soothe the mind. The tea is best selected according to the causes of your sleep problem. For a restless mind, try sour jujube seed, Chinese arborvitae kernel, tuber fleeceflower stem or schisandra. Insomnia due to mental fatigue can be relieved with longan aril, red dates, wolfberry or ginseng tea. For nausea or an upset stomach, hawthorn fruit or tangerine peel tea is recommended, while those unable to sleep due to a headache can try tea with chrysanthemum, Sichuan lovage or cassia seed. A depressed or irritable mood can be treated by drinking lotus plumule, albizia flower, rose bud or jasmine.

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