Hi, I'm Kerry, I'm a sleep practitioner and I work in Leeds.

Hi, I'm Gina, I'm a sleep practitioner and I work in Peterborough. I'm the mum of 2 teenagers, one of which has complex needs.

This is the Sleep Right podcast and, in this episode, we're talking about sleep foods.

For more information and support for families of disabled children, check out the website at [scope.org.uk/sleep.](scope.org.uk/sleep)

Hi Kerry, how are you?

Good thank you. You?

Yes, I am - that's good. So, what is sleepy foods?

Sleepy foods, they're part of the golden hour, so we always include a snack because what we want to do is build the child's natural melatonin to give it a big boost.

There's a lovely list of sleep-inducing foods you should be able to find on our website. All of the foods actually contain Tryptophan which is a really big word, so I don't tend to use it very often, if it's eaten an hour before bed, it becomes melatonin. Do you want to just tell everybody Kerry what melatonin does?

Yeah. So, melatonin is released from the pineal gland and we call it the hormone of darkness, which basically supports the brain and the body to go to sleep. We know children with additional needs or a disability can have lower levels of melatonin or are producing melatonin at the wrong times of the day. So, for some children we need to try and encourage higher levels of that production of the natural melatonin.

So, if we just run through a little bit of the foods. If you've got a child that eats a really restricted diet, it’s about trying to incorporate as many as you can into the day, not just look upon it as a bedtime thing, especially with younger children try to incorporate it into your evening meal, as well as through a snack.

So, of course, one of the big ones is milk and milk products, and that also includes soy milk as well and yogurts. It's just thinking about do they want to have some warm milk or just cold milk for instance?

I often recommend for the milk as well if the child can tolerate it a banana milkshake, a blended banana through it. The difficulty is if we've got some children that have a restricted diet, if they usually drink milk, but then you do it like bananas, milk, separate, but if you've tried to be cunning and put the banana through the milk, but then they realize you've put something in the milk they may stop drinking the milk. So, it’s swings and roundabouts.

Yeah, it's picking things I suppose, and it depends if your child is really interested in food as well, they can help you make the bedtime snack. So, some other things to think of are chicken and turkey. I always use the example of Christmas Day if your family tends to eat turkey on Christmas Day normally everybody tends to have a little bit of a sleep after Christmas dinner, more often than not it's because of the turkey rather than anything else that you might've had.

Then there's a lot of fish. The big one, I don't know about you, Kerry, the one I hear a lot about is cheese. A lot of people associate cheese with nightmares and bad sleep and that is a total myth.

Cheese and crackers I often recommend, especially if we can get teenagers eating sleepy foods, if we can try and get them included in choosing their bedtime snack, that's an appropriate bedtime snack, then getting them making cheese and crackers or cheese on toast.

Cheese on toast is a big one, I think.

Yeah

And there's a lot of fruits. From a fruit perspective, bananas are potentially one of the best ones and equally it is almost like a natural muscle relaxant and cherries as well. I think sometimes it's thinking outside the box, we all know fresh cherries can be massively expensive, sometimes you can get cherry juice with no sugar added, so sometimes it's drinking rather than actually eating it.

You know, there's a wide variety of vegetables that are really high as well, which you are more likely to have in your evening meal. Back to teenagers as long as there's no nut allergy a handful of nuts, and that could be peanuts, cashews, almonds, is supposed to be really good as well – I like pistachio I do. Then the same thing with seeds if they want to have a yogurt with some seeds on top, especially if you've got that sensory seeker who really likes like a good crunchy texture. What are the ones that you hear parents use?

Bananas, it's either yes or no I think because it's the texture sometimes. Some children that can't tolerate the texture of the banana. Other children they really like them. We often talk about if there’s constipation issues with bananas

Yeah.

So, don’t let them have too many bananas if they struggle with constipation. Other than that, it's usually like your dairy products, so we often recommend the milk. Hot chocolate, Ovaltine, yeah, they are milky drinks, but they're not recommended for bedtime. So, it's usually around dairy products, yogurt milk. Again, yogurts you've got to look at sugar content, a fruit yogurt is usually quite good, but not ones that are like chocolate biscuits.

Yeah.

So, like you said cheese on toast or cheese on crackers.

Yeah, I think it is, it's just making people aware isn't it as well about all the ones to avoid, equally as much as the ones that produce melatonin, you know, whether it's caffeinated. Caffeine stays in our system for 4 to 6 hours, so it's even being mindful sometimes especially the younger children when you're allowing them to have the sweets or the chocolate as a treat, they affect things. I think one of the other really popular ones as well, and I know the recipe is online (Scope website) is flapjacks. You can use oats, oatabix for instance as a cereal or something like porridge is also another good one, because that releases its energy slowly throughout the night and to have that combination of milk and oats!

I often recommend cereal as a sleep food if the child will eat cereals, like a non-sugar coated

Yeah.

Cereal is really good for sleep.

I always say even thinking about bread, whole wheat bread is really high in melatonin and obviously some children are really fixated, especially those that I'm sure we've all worked with on the beige diet who just like white bread. Sometimes it's small steps, it's moving to a 50 50, and get them used to it before you actually make a complete change. I think foods is just one of the easy ways, especially if you've got a child who's maybe more of a grazer or you have a child who doesn't like to eat at school. It just kind of gives you another opportunity, doesn't it really?

Yeah, definitely. And I do think a big thing is, like you've said before, introducing it at meals, like from the evening meal, not just a bedtime snack. I worked with a family the little boy was home-schooled and mum started to introduce sleep foods from lunchtime onwards, and she said that she felt like it was a big support in improving sleep.

Yeah, that's brilliant. And also, I think it's to be mindful of when you think about the day meal times. There are really big cues, aren't they, for our body to let us know what stage we are in the day and of cues in general, like internal body cues. So I think sometimes if you do incorporate it in your evening meal, along with that bedtime snack, it just helps build, doesn't it? And that's what we want to look at, is building that kind of sleepiness really.

Yeah. But I do think sleep foods can come into the golden hour routine if we can get the child involved in making the snack with them.

Yeah

I’ve had quite a few parents who have made the sleep food flapjacks and they've got their child involved in the making of it. It does then encourage the child to want to eat the end product, doesn't it, rather than just putting a snack in front of them.

And I think too with teenagers it's that whole thing of looking at things they can make. You can do overnight oats, but equally loads of smoothies and things like that if they'll tolerate it.

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