

Does warm milk really lull us to dreamland? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I recently was reminded about the practice of using warm milk to fall asleep easier. I thought to myself... "Hey, I'm almost ready for bed... why not give it a whirl." So, I took the glass of milk I was already drinking and popped it into the microwave. It was in there for about three minutes and when I opened the door... it had overflowed. Not only that, but when I stuck my finger in to see how hot it was, a skin of milk came off and stuck to my finger. It burned me. To make it worse, the smell of the warmed milk grossed me out so much that I can still smell it now... 15 minutes later. Do people actually like this method? Or, do they just suffer through it to have a good night sleep? And, does it really work?

Answer

Dear Reader,

A cup of warm milk is no magic sleep potion, yet it's probably the most common food associated with bedtime. Milk contains two substances that are known to be related to sleep and relaxation: the hormone melatonin and the amino acid tryptophan. The amount of melatonin in a glass of milk is minute, much less than what would be taken in a supplement. The amount of tryptophan in milk is also small. Moreover, our digestive process is complex. Considering these factors, it's unlikely that a glass of warm — or cold — milk would shorten the length of time that it takes to fall asleep.

Though milk components and serving temperature are not likely to influence the onset of sleep through physiological means, warm milk might have psychological significance. The routine of consuming a glass of warm milk may elicit memories of mom, home, and comforts of childhood that help us to relax. This is part of the natural transition from wakefulness to sleep. Recommendations include practicing stress reduction techniques, sticking to a regular sleep schedule, creating a relaxing bedroom environment, and avoiding caffeine or heavy meals close to bedtime.

For some individuals, particularly those with lactose intolerance or milk allergies, a glass of milk can be followed by uncomfortable digestive consequences. Lactose reduced, soy, almond, and rice milk are options that are more likely to be tolerated. If you have no allergy or intolerance, and

warm milk simply grosses you out, you could try flavoring it with a bit of honey, vanilla, or cinnamon, but there is no reason that you need to continue attempting to use it as a sleep aid. Keep drinking your cold milk, to meet your daily calcium needs, and try other sleep improvement techniques.

Alice!

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