

get
fit

eat
well

enjoy
life!

with uncle chris

HELPFUL HINTS IN THE KITCHEN

Hello folks

It's time we got back to basics. We all seem to get bogged down in the kitchen some times and hopefully some of these tips will help you make it fun in the kitchen again.

Simple meal planning makes life a dream

On a Sunday make a meal plan for the week. Being organised makes meal times more enjoyable. Work out what evening meals to prepare and that way you can do a shopping list of all the ingredients you may need for the week ahead.

Find staple meals that your family love, then by changing some of the ingredients you can spice up those meals and no one will get bored.

Preparation ... the basic ingredient for stress-free meals!

I find online shopping can help with the planning. And just being introduced in supermarkets is same day pickup. No more trudging the shopping aisle; just pick up the groceries on the way home.

Let's get to the cooking.

Think like a factory production line and work clean.

Now you have everything organised let's start preparing for your week ahead.

It's a great idea if you can prepare a couple of meals in advance. If you cook twice as much as you need for the evening meal, then you can have leftovers for another night or freeze for later. I call this Leftover for Larry!

When baking biscuits for lunches or snacks, double the mix. Put half in the freezer in logs ready to roll when needed and bake the other batch.

Double the mix for making cakes, cook up all the mix and freeze the cake you're not using straight away.

Kids' lunches can even be prepared in advance if they like a simple sandwich. It's so easy to pull out of the freezer a Vegemite, honey or ham and cheese sandwich ready to go in the lunch box. It will thaw out nicely for that schoolyard lunch.

Ice cubes are not just for cold drinks

Ice cube trays are great for some leftover liquids. We often need a little amount of liquid and this little trick helps with that.



Liquids that can be frozen include coconut milk, stocks, juices, tomato paste ... the list is endless.

The kitchen grater is just not for cheese

Grate and freeze those unused vegetables – carrots, zucchinis, pumpkin – before they are good only for the compost. Add them to pasta dishes, soups and casseroles.

Mums love sneaking in goodies they serve up for those young veggie haters!

No more crying over onions

Here's how to do it without tears:

Cut the onion in half, from the top to the root.

Place the two halves on a board flat sides down to create a dome shape.

Cut off the non-root end and peel the skin away. Leaving the root end can help you hold the onion when cutting.

Place it back down on the board in the dome position and slice, dice or just a rough chop.

Stop the rocking

Cutting a different shaped vegetable

can sometimes be quite difficult. Here are some steps that might help in the process.

With a sharp knife cut a thin edge along the length of the vegetable to create a flat surface.

Turn the vegetable to the flat side on to the board; this will ensure there is no more rocking.

To trim beans, line up the stems, tap the ends against your knife, then cut off the unwanted knobby bits.

How to skin a tomato

Peeling a tomato can be a fiddly job, so here are some tips to help.

Bring a pot of water to the simmer and put cold water and ice in a bowl.

Using a sharp knife, remove the tomato core and make a cross in the base.

Put the tomato in the hot water for around a minute, then straight into the iced water. The skin should come away from the tomato instantly.

To remove the seeds give the cooled tomato a good squeeze.

HOW TO KEEP YOUR KITCHEN CLEAN

Here are some handy cleaning tips for using white vinegar and baking soda (aka bi-carb soda) in the kitchen.

Baking soda and vinegar are handy basic household cleaning products. Like vinegar, there are three reasons for using baking soda as a cleaner:

- It's non-toxic;
- It's a multipurpose household cleaner;
- Best of all it's cheap!

In the kitchen baking soda and vinegar can be used for many jobs:

To remove unpleasant odours from refrigerators, freezers and cupboards. Leave an open box of baking soda in these areas to absorb smells.

To clean surfaces, sprinkle soda on a damp cloth and then wipe off with clean water.

To clean your sink, wet the sink, sprinkle baking soda over the surface, scrub with a brush then rinse. Line the sink with paper towels soaked in white vinegar for 20 minutes, then rinse with hot soapy water.

To remove stale smells from containers, rinse out with hot water and baking soda. If the smell persists, let the container soak overnight in the baking soda and water mixture.

Run an empty cycle in the dishwasher with a cup of vinegar in the bottom to remove hard water deposits and odours.

Vinegar also makes a great dishwasher rinse aid. It leaves dishes sparkling.

Vinegar and hot water are a quick and effective cleaner for the freezer.

White vinegar can remove sticky and burnt residues from roast pans. Put the pan back in the hot oven with water and vinegar to cover the burnt residue, and after around 30 minutes it should lift easily. You can use the same method for burns on the bottom of pots. Follow the same method, just return to the heat on the stove.

A splash of white vinegar on newspaper is a great way to clean glass and mirrors.

So, happy cleaning!

HEALTHY CHICKEN MEALS

Someone close to me has started a Weight Watchers program. I should say restarted, because it first happened a few decades ago. She's sticking to it this time and has lost almost 15 kilos in 10 months.

Meals that WW suggests are listed in 'smart points' – the fewer the points the better it is for the diet. So a meal that totals 4 smart points is better for you than one with 8 smart points. WW wants her to keep below 24 points a day.

On browsing through her suggested menu pages, I note that chicken meals consistently come out low on the smart points register – so she eats lots of chicken. The skin is removed, of course, from both thighs and breasts before the cooking process. Oil is used sparingly, but the meals can be herbed up to enhance the flavour.

My chicken recipes aren't Weight Watchers' suggestions, but they are healthy and tasty and easy to prepare. These are meals for four.

Chicken saltimbocca

4 x 220g chicken breast fillets, butterflyed
8 basil leaves
8 slices prosciutto
4 slices camembert
200g roasted capsicum, sliced
60ml olive oil
1 onion, finely chopped
125ml dry white wine

Place chicken fillets cut-side up on a clean work surface. Cover with plastic wrap and, using a meat mallet or rolling pin, pound until they're about 1cm thick. Season both sides with salt and pepper.

Lay 2 slices of prosciutto slices, overlapping, on the workbench (so they form a sheet large enough to enclose the chicken). Place a chicken fillet across the slices, then top with a layer of cheese, basil and capsicum.

Starting at one short end, roll up chicken and filling, using the prosciutto to enclose. Tie in 2-3 places with kitchen string. Repeat with remaining chicken and filling. Chill for 15 minutes while you preheat oven to 180°C.

Heat remaining oil in a large ovenproof frypan over medium-high heat. Brown chicken all over, turning, for 2-3 minutes. Transfer to the oven for 10 minutes until chicken is cooked and cheese is melted.

Chicken and chorizo stew

4 chicken marylands
4 chorizos, sliced
olive oil
2 red onions, diced
3 cloves of garlic, crushed
400g can diced tomatoes
250g jar roasted red capsicums in oil, drained and cut in thick strips
400ml chicken stock
½ bunch of fresh rosemary, chopped
80g mixed olives, pitted
1 pinch of saffron, steeped in 300 ml boiling water
1 lemon, zested
sea salt and cracked pepper

Drizzle a little oil into a large casserole pan over a medium heat. Season the chicken well with sea salt and black pepper, brown in batches in the pan for a few minutes, then remove to a plate.

Slice the chorizo, then cook for 4-5 minutes or until crisp and golden, stirring regularly. Transfer to the chicken plate, leaving the flavoured oil behind in the pan.

Add the onion and garlic, then cook in the flavoured oil for 10 minutes or until softened, stirring occasionally.

Add the capsicum to the onions and garlic. Cook for a couple of minutes, then turn the heat up to high and add saffron infused water

to deglaze the pan. Allow to reduce a little, then add the tomatoes and chicken stock.

Add rosemary to the pan along with the chicken, chorizo and any juices from the plate.

Reduce the heat to low and cook with the lid ajar for 1 hour 30 minutes or until the chicken is tender and the sauce has thickened. Add olives and stir through the stew.

Combine the remaining chopped rosemary and lemon zest together, then scatter over the stew.

Chicken, tomato and vegetable soup

6 chicken thigh fillets, skin off
4 tablespoons olive oil
1 onion, finely chopped
3 celery stalks, finely diced
2 carrots, diced
2 garlic cloves, crushed
1 teaspoon fennel seeds
1 bay leaf
2 x 400g cans chopped tomatoes
1.5 litres chicken stock
2 tablespoons finely grated parmesan
½ bunch oregano, leaves picked and chopped
2 slices sourdough, crusts removed, torn
Salt and pepper

Heat 2 tablespoons oil in a large saucepan over medium-high heat. Season chicken and cook, turning, for 6-7 minutes until golden.

Remove and set aside. Add onion, celery, carrot and garlic. Reduce heat to medium-low. Cook, stirring, for 6 minutes or until soft. Add fennel seeds and bay leaf, and cook, stirring, for 2 minutes or until fragrant.

Add the tomato and stock, increase heat to high. Bring to the boil, then return chicken to the pot with half the oregano.

Reduce heat to medium and cook, stirring occasionally, for 1 hour 15 minutes or until thickened and chicken is breaking down.

Heat remaining 2 tablespoons of oil in a frypan over medium heat. Add torn sourdough and cook, stirring, for 4 minutes or until golden. Stir through grated parmesan and seasoning. Remove from heat.

Serve the soup with sourdough crumbs and reserved oregano.

Chicken parmigiana

4 x 180g chicken breasts
2 cups panko breadcrumbs
2 tablespoons Italian herbs, dried
2 tablespoons powdered parmesan
½ teaspoon salt
75g plain flour
2 eggs, lightly beaten with milk
2 tablespoons milk
sunflower oil, to shallow fry
80g mozzarella cheese
500g vine cherry tomatoes
extra virgin olive oil to drizzle

Combine the panko crumbs, herbs, parmesan and salt in a bowl. Place the flour and egg and milk mix in separate bowls.

Flatten the chicken breasts slightly with a rolling pin, then individually coat in the flour, then the egg mix and then the panko mix.

Preheat oven grill to high.

Heat 1 ½ cm oil in a frypan over medium-high heat. Add the chicken and cook for 4 minutes each side, until golden and cooked. Drain on paper towel.

While you are cooking the chicken place the cherry tomatoes on a tray lined with baking paper and drizzle with a little oil and seasoning. Cook for 4-5 minutes until tomatoes are starting to collapse.

Place the chicken on a baking tray lined with baking paper. Top with cheese then melt till golden and bubbling under the grill, top with tomatoes and serve.

Cheesy chicken and pasta bake

2 skinless chicken breasts, diced
3 tablespoons olive oil
1 brown onion, finely diced
3 cloves garlic, crushed
100g bacon, diced
800g pumpkin, peeled and diced
¼ teaspoon chilli flakes, optional
3 cups chicken stock
300g macaroni
300ml cream
1 tablespoon sage
2 cups breadcrumbs
2 teaspoons lemon zest

1 tablespoon Italian parsley, chopped
¼ cup grated smoked cheddar

Preheat oven to 200C. Heat 1 tablespoon of oil in frying pan over medium heat, add onion, garlic, chilli flakes (optional) and bacon and cook, stirring for 2-3 minutes. Then add chicken and continue to brown.

Add pumpkin and continue cooking. Deglaze the pan with the chicken stock and cook for a further 5-6 minutes until pumpkin begins to soften.

Stir in pasta, cream and sage plus seasoning. Bring to the simmer, then reduce heat to low and cook for 8-10 minutes until pasta and pumpkin are tender.

Meanwhile place breadcrumbs, zest, parsley and a third of the cheese in food processor and process until you have fine breadcrumbs. Add 2 tablespoons oil and pulse to combine.

Stir remaining cheese into the pasta mix, transfer to baking dish and scatter with breadcrumbs and bake for 15 minutes until golden.

Chicken, pumpkin and blue cheese risotto

2 skinless chicken breasts, diced
400g butternut pumpkin
2 tablespoon olive oil, plus a drizzle for the pumpkin
2 garlic cloves, crushed
1 large brown onion, peeled and finely diced
300g arborio rice
1 litre hot chicken stock
125ml white wine
100g grated parmesan
100g danish blue or gorgonzola
3 sprigs sage, finely chopped
30g butter

Preheat oven to 180C. Chop pumpkin into 1.5cm cubes. Put on a baking tray, drizzle over some oil, sage and seasoning, then roast for 30 minutes.

Put the stock on a low heat, in a small saucepan and bring to the simmer.

In a second saucepan on a low heat, add the olive oil, garlic and onion. Gently cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.

When the onion has softened but not coloured, turn the heat up to medium, add chicken and stir in the rice and a

pinch of salt, continually stir until the rice becomes translucent.

Deglaze the pan with the wine and when absorbed ladle-by-ladle, add the stock slowly. Make sure the stock keeps simmering during this process! Remember to make sure that the rice has absorbed all the stock of each ladle before adding another ladle of the stock. This process will take around 15-20 minutes. It releases the starch and increases creaminess.

Once the rice is cooked to al dente, gently stir in the butter, grated cheese, blue cheese and roasted pumpkin with sage. Adjust the seasoning and serve.

Chicken and mushroom casserole

500g chicken breast, sliced
600g mushrooms (swiss brown, portobello or button or a combo of all)
4 tablespoons olive oil
4 brown onions, sliced
4 cloves garlic, crushed
few sprigs thyme chopped
2 cup chicken stock
¼ cup of madeira or marsala
1 teaspoon arrowroot, optional
4 handfuls baby spinach leaves
chopped parsley

In a large pan, sauté onions, garlic and thyme in 2 tablespoons of olive oil over a medium heat for a few minutes until coloured.

Add the mushrooms and continue to cook for another 5 minutes until browned and caramelised.

Remove the cooked mushrooms and onion from the pan into a bowl then return the pan back to the stove.

Add remaining oil, then chicken and sauté quickly until browned.

Deglaze the pan with the madeira or marsala and then add the stock.

Return the mushroom and onion plus any juices back to the pan and heat through.

Thicken if necessary with arrowroot.

Add the spinach just before serving
Garnish with chopped parsley.

Butter chicken

700g chicken thighs, skin off
120g butter
1 large onion, diced
4 garlic cloves, crushed
2 teaspoons ground garam masala
1 teaspoon ground cardamom
1 teaspoon ground coriander
1 teaspoon ground ginger
1 teaspoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon ground paprika
3 tablespoons tomato paste
½ teaspoon salt
400g coconut cream

Heat butter in a large sauce pan over a medium heat, add onion and sauté for 3 minutes until translucent.

Lower the heat and add garlic and spices,

cook until fragrant. Add tomato paste and cook out for 1 minute.

Add coconut cream and chicken, stir to combine and coat all ingredients. Cook stirring occasionally for 30-40 minutes until the chicken is cooked and tender. Serve with steamed rice.

Chicken and pesto pasta

2 skinless chicken breasts, diced
350g penne
300ml light cream
½ cup basil pesto
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 brown onion, diced
2 garlic cloves, crushed
½ cup drained sun-dried tomatoes, thinly sliced
½ cup finely grated parmesan cheese

Cook pasta in a saucepan of boiling, salted water, following packet directions, until tender. Drain, reserving ¼ cup liquid.

In the same pot over a medium heat add oil, onion, garlic and sauté for 2 minutes without colour. Add chicken and continue to cook until chicken is golden in colour.

Add reserved liquid, cream, pesto and tomato and cook until chicken is cooked. Return pasta to pan with ¼ cup of parmesan, stir to combine. Cook, stirring, for 1 to 2 minutes or until heated through and sauce coats the pasta.

Divide between bowls. Top with remaining parmesan.

Satay chicken

1 kg chicken thighs, trimmed and cut into strips
1 large brown onion, cut in wedges
2 cloves garlic, crushed
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 tablespoon Malaysian curry paste
250 mls satay sauce, fountain brand
140 mls coconut milk
1 tablespoon crunchy peanut butter
200 g portobello mushrooms, sliced
1 small red capsicum, sliced
salt and pepper

Heat oil in large pan. Add onion, garlic and curry paste and sauté for 3 minutes, add chicken and fry to colour. Add mushrooms and capsicum continue cooking for 5 minutes.

Finely add satay sauce, coconut milk, peanut butter and seasoning. Simmer uncovered for 20 minutes or until chicken is tender, cooked and sauce is thickened.

Chicken cacciatore

1.4 kilos skinless chicken thighs
2 tablespoons olive oil
200g zucchini, diced
1 small red capsicum, diced
1 red onion, finely chopped
2 rashers bacon, sliced
2 garlic cloves, crushed
½ cup red wine
500ml tomato sugo
175g kalamata olives, pitted
2 tablespoons salted baby capers, drained
½ bunch oregano leaves

Heat 1 tablespoon of the oil in a large frying pan over high heat. Add half the chicken and cook, turning occasionally for 5 minutes until golden brown. Transfer to a plate. Keep repeating with the remaining chicken until all browned.

Add half the remaining oil to the pan over high heat. Add garlic and cook, stirring for 1-2 minutes. Add onion and bacon cook, stirring occasionally, for 5 minutes or until onion softens. Finely add zucchini and capsicum and cook, stirring occasionally, for 2-3 minutes or until golden. Transfer to a plate.

Heat remaining oil over medium heat. Return chicken, bacon and other vegetables to the pan. Pour over the wine and bring to the boil, deglazing the pan. Add the sugo and stir to combine. Reduce heat to medium-low. Cook, uncovered stirring occasionally, for 20 minutes or until the chicken is cooked through and sauce thickens slightly. Add the olives, capers and half the oregano, stir to combine. Remove from heat. Sprinkle with remaining oregano and serve.

Old fashioned apricot chicken

500g skinless chicken breasts, cut into tenderloin strip size
1 packet french onion soup
1 can apricot nectar
3 tablespoons plain flour
1 tablespoon curry powder
salt and pepper

Heat oven to 180C. In a pot bring nectar to the simmer, whisk in French onion soup to remove lumps and continue to simmer whisking until sauce thickens.

Combine flour, curry powder and seasoning in a bowl. Coat the chicken strips with flour mix and tap to remove excess flour, place into the base of a baking dish. Cover with apricot sauce and cover with foil or a lid, bake for 40-45 minutes or until cooked.

Now for dessert ...

Chocolate fudge pudding

1 cup self-raising flour
½ cup caster sugar
1 tablespoon butter
Pinch salt
2 tablespoons cocoa powder
1 cup milk
½ teaspoon vanilla essence

Pre-heat oven to 180C

Sift flour, cocoa and salt. Add sugar. Then add melted butter with milk and vanilla. Mix ingredients until smooth. Put mixture into a baking dish.

Combine topping in the bowl from which you just removed the pudding mixture.

Topping

½ cup brown sugar
2 tablespoons cocoa
1½ cups boiling water

Combine topping ingredients, gathering any leftover batter mixture, pour over the pudding and bake in oven for ¾ hour. You will need to sit your baking dish on a tray just in case it bubbles over.

Caramel raisin pudding

1½ cups self-raising flour
1 cup raisins
1/3 cup brown sugar
pinch of salt
½ cup milk
½ teaspoon vanilla essence

Pre-heat oven to 180C. Sift flour and salt, add sugar and raisins. Mix well until a smooth paste is formed with milk and vanilla, pour into ovenproof baking dish.

Combine topping in the bowl from which you just removed the pudding mixture.

Topping

1 cup brown sugar
1 tablespoon butter
1½ cups boiling water

Combine topping ingredients, gathering any leftover batter mixture, pour over the pudding and bake in oven for ¾ hour. You will need to sit your baking dish on a tray just in case it bubbles over.



HOW TO ACHIEVE A BETTER NIGHT'S SLEEP

Hey Brighton

Please ignore the irony of me promoting today's topic while writing this after midnight. For this edition I'm going to explore one of the most important and beloved aspects of life: sleep.

At the start of each week, I go into work as a high school teacher, and ask students what they got up to on the weekend. The answer is almost always 'sleep'. I long for the day where they open up further, so to the parents out there wanting to know how their kids are really going, I now understand your pain.

I am not delusional. I know that becoming a fitness fanatic is not the goal for all people. That makes the role of a health advocate tricky at times, but one thing I am far more certain on is that people do care about sleep, and want to maximise their time dreaming while their heads meet the pillows.

As with increasing morale, limiting stress, maximising energy, and other factors I've mentioned previously, the way the body is built does also link the effects of exercise with length and quality of sleep.

Having never really suffered from insomnia or other sleeping issues, I have recently been curious about whether this was due to time spent training. There are in fact many studies that do

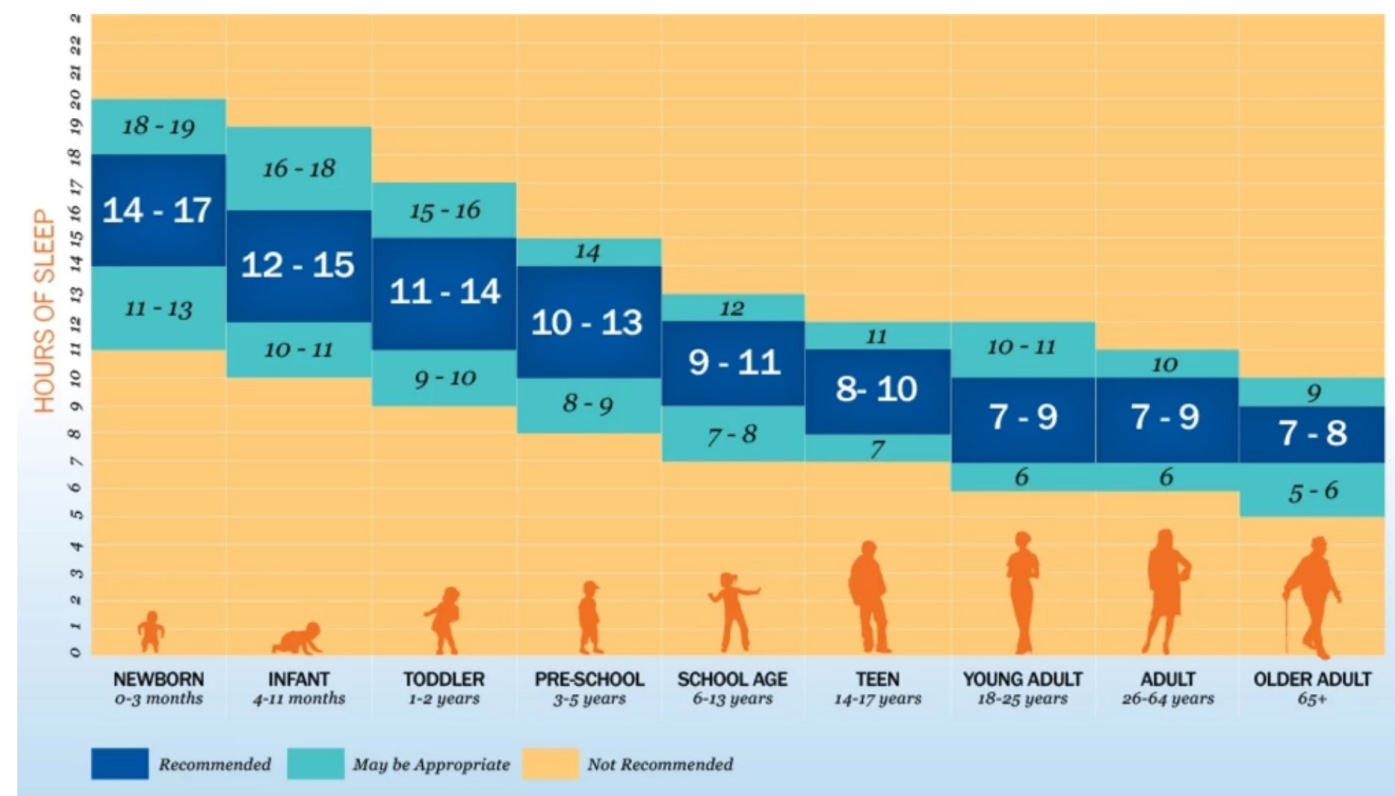
support this. For ease of reading, I'll break down what I found into subsections.

General facts

The National Sleep Foundation recently released the latest agreed upon optimum requirements in relation to daily sleep periods. These are shown in the diagram pictured below.

What is most interesting about this is the concept that too much sleep can actually be just as detrimental as not getting enough. I have never given this much thought, but this following link gives a long list of possible negative impacts from having far excess of 10 hours sleep on a regular basis as an adult, or more than 14 hours as a pre-schooler. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rosie-osmun/oversleeping-the-effects-and-health-risks-of-sleeping-too-much_b_9092982.html

As a rule, it seems that around nine hours per night is a solid, general aim to shoot for in order to maximise recovery and get ready for the next day. A study by the same group in 2016 found that the average hours spent asleep reported by participants was a little over seven hours per night. In fact, 33-45% of Australian adults reported having inadequate sleep, with 20% experiencing insomnia. As with conditions such as sleep apnea, insomnia (and also excessive sleep, based on the studies) is found to impair the conduct of many daily activities.



'When we aren't dreaming, the body's temperature is 1-2 degrees lower than during the day and blood pressure drops by 10-20%'



What happens when we sleep?

Obviously when we sleep the muscles are far less active and are in a resting state. While muscles rest, the body is recovering by lowering blood pressure, dropping heart rate to give our pump (the heart) a rest too, and lowering breathing rate.

In the phase of sleep that takes up around 80% of the time (when we aren't dreaming), the body's temperature is 1-2 degrees lower than during the day, and blood pressure drops by 10-20%. These processes couple with a big increase in growth hormones to allow muscles etc the chance to rebuild.

Most studies have also found that during non REM sleep (when we don't dream), the brain spends the period consolidating memories instead of sending off actions to move the body through the nerves.

How does exercise affect sleep?

As discussed above, the process of falling asleep and maintaining that state relies on the body lowering temperature and blood pressure. Exercise affects these both after single workouts and over extended periods of adding exercise into your routine.

The effects of single sessions on sleep go beyond making the body 'feel tired'. While blood pressure actually increases while you exercise, due to higher requirements of oxygen into muscles, the body will drop back to normal or lower even shortly afterwards.

Historically this increase in blood pressure and temperature close to bed time has been seen as a no no, but recently some studies have shown that just like taking a hot bath before bed,

this rapid cooling and blood pressure lowering process may actually bring on sleep.

Either way, it is best to leave around two hours between exercise and sleep to optimise the effect on the body. The lower blood pressure after exercise will assist regardless of whether you trained in the morning or night. The exercise bout also means you'll exert more energy, and as a result this will trigger the body's need to sleep longer, and spend more time in deep sleep in order to recover. This recovery will be beneficial in all areas.

The physiological link between exercise and sleep quality is more obvious when you continue exercising over extended periods. The fitter you get, the better your heart gets at pumping blood around the body. The better this gets, the less blood pressure is required and as a result the quicker your body will be able to find that sweet spot before sleep.

With reduced stress as well, the mind is also less distracted and more ready to wonder off into the moonlight hours. This has even been supported by studies on chronic insomniacs, who got to sleep significantly faster after 2-4 months of semi-regular exercise over 30 minutes three times a week.

As identified earlier, we don't all need more sleep and in fact some should have less, but for those out there who would love a way to achieve a better night's sleep (and my mum is one of them) exercise is again the body's natural version of the more heavy sleep pills you'll find at the chemist.

Just a thought, and hope all is going well.

Until next time.

Tristan



Simple rules for TASTY TOMATOES

To borrow a 1970s advertising line, it's as Aussie as football, meat pies, kangaroos and Holden cars.

It's an annual ritual to gladden the heart. It's the iconic, spirit-lifting act of planting a few backyard tomatoes.

What's not to love about it!

Apart from providing a plentiful supply of fabulously fresh tommies down the track, it's symbolic acknowledgment that winter is well gone and wonderful warming summer will soon be ours.

The beauty of tomato growing is you don't need a vast garden. Even the smallest vegie patch or collection of pots will do it, and you don't need to be a garden whizz.

Follow a few simple rules and tomato triumph can easily be yours. Come late summer, you'll be plucking ripe fruit straight from the vine and smelling that sublime tomato aroma.

To join the ritual, you need to get active now.

Now to the rules.

Sunshine and soil

Tomatoes are warmth lovers and need about seven hours of good sunshine a day. They also need soil that drains well (if your location is too low, boggy or clayey you can either build it up, or grow in pots). Choose a spot protected from wind and not where tomatoes have grown in the previous three years.

Work the soil

If planning a garden bed, dig the soil to about a spade's depth, working it over, eliminating weeds, clods and rocks and stones and generally achieving a

"fine tilth" (garden talk for crumbly like breadcrumbs).

Compost

During the process, work in some compost. If you don't have compost, buy a bag or two from a garden centre and dig that in. If you can get your hands on some, well rotted animal manure (not cat and dog but sheep, cow or horse) is excellent. Dig that in too. If your soil is acidic (a good gauge is whether camellias and azaleas grow well nearby), it pays to sprinkle a good handful of lime (available from nurseries). Adding a handful of sulphate of potash will help disease resistance and tomato flavour.

'Growing tomatoes is a ritual to be cherished'

Plant

Don't consider this until soils have warmed (late October/early November). Plant seedlings 80cm or even more apart (they need plenty of air movement around them). If planting a tall-growing variety, position a stake next to each plant so they can be secured with soft ties (old pantihose are ideal) as they grow up. To save money, you can even grow from seed. Sow seed in trays or pots of seed-raising mix in a warm spot on a windowsill or veranda and seedlings will be right for planting when conditions have warmed. By sowing seed, you will inevitably get a far greater range of varieties to choose from.

Feed well – but not too well

Early on, tomatoes can be treated a little mean. Don't fertilise until flower trusses start to appear. Use a fertiliser tailored to tomatoes and stick to the recommended application rate.

Water

Water the soil around them, not the plants themselves. The key is regular watering, neither too much nor too little. Stick your finger into the soil. If it's moist they are right, if it's dry then your tomatoes need watering. If you don't water regularly, your tomatoes won't be able to draw up calcium through their roots and can suffer a yucky disease called blossom end rot.

Mulch

Lucerne hay, pea straw, sugar cane or even grass clippings are perfect and will help maintain moisture in the soil when the weather heats up.

Prune

Some growers like to prune, some don't. Whatever, it's a good idea to remove the lowest leaves where fungal disease is often introduced via infection when water splashes up off the ground when watering. Also, pinching out (thumb and forefinger) the growths or suckers that appear between the axils (joints between the leaves and main stems) will discourage too much bushy growth. Once plants start producing, the lower fruit generally ripens first. As these are harvested, it's a good ploy to remove the lower leaves nearby to allow plants greater air circulation in order to further guard against fungal disease.

Go a little potty

Tomatoes adapt readily to pots, although it pays to choose more compact varieties (check the label). Use only top-grade potting mix (nursery people can advise) and pay close attention to regular watering. Pots dry out a lot quicker than garden beds.

Tickle a little

To encourage pollination, grow a few brightly coloured, insect-attracting plants, such as marigolds, nearby, and when flowers open give them a tickle with a small paintbrush, moving from flower to flower. Or you can simply give plants a gentle shake to dislodge pollen.

While there are definite rules to growing good tomatoes, don't get uptight. The best tomatoes are those grown with fun and love.

Celebrate being in the great outdoors. Encourage kids to get involved, maybe with their own couple of tomato plants.

Growing tomatoes is a ritual to be cherished.

