

Teenagers and sleep

Sleep research suggests that a teenager needs between nine and 10 hours of sleep every night. This is more than the amount a child or an adult needs. Yet most adolescents only get about seven or eight hours. Some get less.

Regularly not getting enough sleep leads to chronic sleep deprivation. This can have dramatic effects on a teenager's life, including reduced academic performance at school. One recent US study found that lack of sleep was a common factor in teenagers who receive poor to average school marks.

Causes of sleep deprivation

Some of the reasons why many teenagers regularly do not get enough sleep include:

- **Hormonal time shift** – puberty hormones shift the teenager's body clock forward by about one or two hours, making them sleepier one to two hours later. Yet, while the teenager falls asleep later, early school starts don't allow them to sleep in. This nightly 'sleep debt' leads to chronic sleep deprivation.
- **Hectic after-school schedule** – homework, sport, part-time work and social commitments can cut into a teenager's sleeping time.
- **Leisure activities** – the lure of stimulating entertainment such as television, the Internet and computer gaming can keep a teenager out of bed.
- **Light exposure** – light cues the brain to stay awake. In the evening, lights from televisions, mobile phones and computers can prevent adequate production of melatonin, the brain chemical (neurotransmitter) responsible for sleep.
- **Vicious circle** – insufficient sleep causes a teenager's brain to become more active. An over-aroused brain is less able to fall asleep.
- **Social attitudes** – in Western culture, keeping active is valued more than sleep.
- **Sleep disorder** – sleep disorders, such as restless legs syndrome or sleep apnoea, can affect how much sleep a teenager gets.

Effects of sleep deprivation

The developing brain of a teenager needs between nine and 10 hours of sleep every night. The effects of chronic (ongoing) sleep deprivation may include:

- Concentration difficulties
- Mentally 'drifting off' in class
- Shortened attention span
- Memory impairment
- Poor decision making
- Lack of enthusiasm
- Moodiness and aggression
- Depression
- Risk-taking behaviour
- Slower physical reflexes
- Clumsiness, which may result in physical injuries
- Reduced sporting performance
- Reduced academic performance
- Increased number of 'sick days' from school because of tiredness
- Truancy.

Preventing sleep deprivation – tips for parents

Try not to argue with your teenager about bedtime. Instead, discuss the issue with them. Together, brainstorm ways to increase their nightly quota of sleep. Suggestions include:

- Allow your child to sleep in on the weekends.
- Encourage an early night every Sunday. A late night on Sunday followed by an early Monday morning will make your child drowsy for the start of the school week.
- Decide together on appropriate time limits for any stimulating activity such as homework, television or computer games. Encourage restful activities during the evening, such as reading.
- Avoid early morning appointments, classes or training sessions for your child if possible.
- Help your child to better schedule their after-school commitments to free up time for rest and sleep.
- Assess your child's weekly schedule together and see if they are overcommitted. Help them to trim activities.
- Encourage your child to take an afternoon nap after school to help recharge their battery, if they have time.
- Work together to adjust your teenager's body clock. You may like to consult with your doctor first.

Preventing sleep deprivation – tips for teenagers

The typical teenage brain wants to go to bed late and sleep late the following morning, which is usually hard to manage. You may be able to adjust your body clock but it takes time. Suggestions include:

- Choose a relaxing bedtime routine; for example, have a bath and a hot milky drink before bed.
- Avoid loud music, homework, computer games or any other activity that gets your mind racing for about an hour before bedtime.
- Keep your room dark at night. The brain's sleep-wake cycle is largely set by light received through the eyes. Try to avoid watching television right before bed. In the morning, expose your eyes to lots of light to help wake up your brain.
- Do the same bedtime routine every night for at least four weeks to make your brain associate this routine with going to sleep.
- Start your bedtime routine a little earlier than usual (for example, 10 minutes) after four weeks. Do this for one week.
- Add an extra 10 minutes every week until you have reached your desired bedtime.
- Avoid staying up late on the weekends. Late nights will undo your hard work.
- Remember that even 30 minutes of extra sleep each night on a regular basis makes a big difference. However, it may take about six weeks of getting extra sleep before you feel the benefits.

Other issues to consider

If lack of sleep is still a problem despite your best efforts, suggestions include:

- Assess your sleep hygiene. For example, factors that may be interfering with your quality of sleep include a noisy bedroom, a lumpy mattress or the habit of lying awake and worrying.
- Consider learning a relaxation technique to help you wind down in readiness for sleep.
- Avoid having any food or drink that contains caffeine after dinnertime. This includes coffee, tea, cola drinks and chocolate.
- Avoid recreational drugs (including alcohol, tobacco and cannabis) as they can cause you to have broken and poor quality sleep.
- See your doctor if self-help techniques don't increase your nightly sleep quota.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Sleep disorder clinic

Things to remember

- Sleep research suggests that a teenager needs between nine and 10 hours of sleep every night.
- Chronic sleep deprivation can have dramatic effects on a teenager's life, including reduced academic performance at school.
- Even 30 minutes of extra sleep each night makes a difference.
- All recreational drugs (including alcohol, caffeinated drinks and cannabis) and chocolate can cause broken sleep.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Newcastle Sleep Disorders Centre

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