

Teenagers and Sleep

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Summary

- Most teenagers only get about 6.5-7.5 hours sleep per night.
- Teen's body clocks naturally shift to make them feel tired later in the evening
- Chronic sleep deprivation can have dramatic effects on a teenager's life, including affecting their mental wellbeing and reducing their academic performance at school.
- Smart-phones and other devices used around bed-time reduce sleep time.
- Avoiding stimulants such as coffee, tea, soft drinks and energy drinks in the evening help sleep

Sleep research suggests that a teenager needs between eight 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 6.5 – 7.5 hours of sleep per night, and some get less. Regularly not getting enough sleep leads to chronic sleep deprivation. This can have dramatic effects on a teenager's life, impacting their mental wellbeing, increasing their risk of depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. It can also affect academic performance at school.

Causes of teenage 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
- Screen staring – phones and other devices used at bedtime reduce sleep. Teens who put down their phones an hour before bed gain 21 minutes sleep a night (that's one hour & 45 minutes per week)
- Hectic after-school schedule – homework, sport, work and social commitments cut into sleep 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, a 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 – restless legs or sleep apnoea can affect how much sleep a teenager gets

Effects of teenage sleep deprivation - The developing brain of a teenager needs between eight 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
Truancy

Preventing sleep deprivation in teenagers – 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 activities such as homework or screen time. Encourage restful activities during the evening, such as reading.
- Avoid early morning appointments, classes or training sessions for your child if possible.
- Help your teenager to better schedule their after-school commitments to free up time for rest and sleep.
- Assess your teenager's weekly schedule together and see if they are overcommitted. Help them to trim activities if they are.
- Encourage your teen 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.

Top sleep 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, or use meditation or mindfulness activities. Gentle yoga may also help.
- Avoid screens such as computers, TV or smart phones, loud music, homework or any other activity that gets your mind racing for at least an hour before bedtime.
- Avoid stimulants in the evening like coffee, tea, soft drinks and energy drinks.
- Keep your bedroom dark at night. Your brain's sleep-wake cycle is largely set by light received through the eyes. Try to avoid watching television or using smartphones 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.
- Get active during the day so you are more physically tired at night.
- Set up a comfortable sleep environment.
- Set up a regular wake-up time
- 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.