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Teens and Sleep

Sleep Topics

Sleep is food for the brain. During sleep, important body functions and brain activity occur. Skipping sleep can be harmful — even deadly, particularly if you are behind the wheel. You can look bad, you may feel moody, and you perform poorly. Sleepiness can make it hard to get along with your family and friends and hurt your scores on school exams, on the court or on the field. Remember: A brain that is hungry for sleep will get it, even when you don't expect it. For example, drowsiness and falling asleep at the wheel cause more than 100,000 car crashes every year. When you do not get enough sleep, you are more likely to have an accident, injury and/or illness.

FACTS:

- Sleep is vital to your well-being, as important as the air you breathe, the water you drink and the food you eat. It can even help you to eat better and manage the stress of being a teen.
- Biological sleep patterns shift toward later times for both sleeping and waking during adolescence -- meaning it is natural to not be able to fall asleep before 11:00 pm.
- **Teens need about 9 1/4 hours of sleep each night to function best** (for some, 8 1/2 hours is enough). Most teens do not get enough sleep — one study found that only 15% reported sleeping 8 1/2 hours on school nights.
- Teens tend to have irregular sleep patterns across the week — they typically stay up late and sleep in late on the weekends, which can affect their biological clocks and hurt the quality of their sleep.
- Many teens suffer from treatable sleep disorders, such as narcolepsy, insomnia, restless legs syndrome or sleep apnea.



CONSEQUENCES:

Not getting enough sleep or having sleep difficulties can:

- **Limit your ability to learn, listen, concentrate and solve problems.** You may even forget important information like names, numbers, your homework or a date with a special person in your life;
- **Make you more prone to pimples.** Lack of sleep can contribute to acne and other skin problems;
- Lead to aggressive or inappropriate behavior such as yelling at your friends or being impatient with your teachers or family members;
- Cause you to eat too much or eat unhealthy foods like sweets and fried foods that lead to weight gain;
- Heighten the effects of alcohol and possibly increase use of caffeine and nicotine; and
- Contribute to illness, not using equipment safely or driving drowsy.

SOLUTIONS:

- Make sleep a priority. Review Teen Time in this toolkit and keep the Teen Sleep Diary. Decide what you need to change to get enough sleep to stay healthy, happy, and smart!
- Naps can help pick you up and make you work more efficiently, if you plan them right. Naps that are too long or too close to bedtime can interfere with your regular sleep.
- Make your room a sleep haven. Keep it cool, quiet and dark. If you need to, get eyeshades or blackout curtains. Let in bright light in the morning to signal your body to wake up.
- No pills, vitamins or drinks can replace good sleep. Consuming caffeine close to bedtime can hurt your sleep, so avoid coffee, tea, soda/pop and chocolate late in the day so you can get to sleep at night. Nicotine and alcohol will also interfere with your sleep.
- When you are sleep deprived, you are as impaired as driving with a blood alcohol content of .08%, which is illegal for drivers in many states. Drowsy driving causes over 100,000 crashes each year. Recognize sleep deprivation and call someone else for a ride. Only sleep can save you!
- **Establish a bed and wake-time and stick to it, coming as close as you can on the weekends. A consistent sleep schedule will help you feel less tired since it allows your body to get in sync with its natural patterns. You will find that it's easier to fall asleep at bedtime with this type of routine.**
- **Don't eat, drink, or exercise within a few hours of your bedtime. Don't leave your homework for the last minute. Try to avoid the TV, computer and telephone in the hour before you go to bed. Stick to quiet, calm activities, and you'll fall asleep much more easily!**
- **If you do the same things every night before you go to sleep, you teach your body the signals that it's time for bed. Try taking a bath or shower (this will leave you extra time in the morning), or reading a book.**
- Try keeping a diary or to-do lists. If you jot notes down before you go to sleep, you'll be less likely to stay awake worrying or stressing.
- When you hear your friends talking about their all-nighters, tell them how good you feel after getting enough sleep.
- Most teens experience changes in their sleep schedules. Their internal body clocks can cause them to fall asleep and wake up later. You can't change this, but you can participate in interactive activities and classes to help counteract your sleepiness. Make sure your activities at night are calming to counteract your already heightened alertness.

If teens need about 9 1/4 hours of sleep to do their best and naturally go to sleep around 11:00 pm, one way to get more sleep is to start school later.

Teens' natural sleep cycle puts them in conflict with school start times. Most high school students need an alarm clock or a parent to wake them on school days. They are like zombies getting ready for school and find it hard to be alert and pay attention in class. Because they are sleep deprived, they are sleepy all day and cannot do their best.

Schools that have set later bell times find that students do not go to bed later, but get one hour more of sleep per school night, which means five hours more per week.

Enrollment and attendance improves and students are more likely to be on time when school starts. Parents and teachers report that teens are more alert in the morning and in better moods; they are less likely to feel depressed or need to visit the nurse or school counselor.

POLL DATA:

While everyone is accustomed to having a bad morning here and there – feeling irritable, unhappy or even sad, NSF's 2006 *Sleep in America* poll found that many adolescents exhibit symptoms of a depressive mood on a frequent if not daily basis, and these teens are more likely to have sleep problems.

The NSF poll calculated depressive mood scores for each of the 1,602 poll respondents by measuring adolescents' responses to four mood states (using a scale of "1" to "3" where 1 equals "not at all" and 3 equals "much"):

- Felt unhappy, sad or depressed;
- Felt hopeless about the future;
- Felt nervous or tense; and
- Worried too much about things.

The results showed that about half (46%) of the adolescents surveyed had a depressive mood score of 10 to 14, 37% had a score of 15 to 19, and 17% had a score of 20 to 30; these scores are considered low, moderate and high respectively.

Most notably, those adolescents with high scores ranging from 20 to 30 were more likely than those with lower scores to take longer to fall asleep on school nights, get an insufficient amount of sleep and have sleep problems related to sleepiness. In fact, 73% of those adolescents who report feeling unhappy, sad, or depressed also report not getting enough sleep at night and being excessively sleepy during the day.

While many adults may think that adolescents have things easy or don't have much to worry about – the opposite seems true according to the NSF poll. Most adolescents were likely to say they worried about things too much (58%) and/or felt stressed out/anxious (56%). Many of the adolescents surveyed also reported feeling hopeless about the future, or feeling unhappy, sad or depressed much or somewhat within the past two weeks of surveying.

Research shows that lack of sleep affects mood, and a depressed mood can lead to lack of sleep. To combat this vicious cycle, sleep experts recommend that teens prioritize sleep and focus on healthy sleep habits. Teens can start by getting the 8.5 to 9.25 hours of sleep they need each night, keeping consistent sleep and wake schedules on school nights and weekends, and opting for relaxing activities such as reading or taking a warm shower or bath before bed instead of turning on the TV or computer.

"If parents and teens know what good sleep entails and the benefits of making and sticking to a plan that supports good sleep, then they might re-examine their choices about what truly are their 'essential' activities," says Mary Carskadon, Ph.D., Director of Chronobiology/Sleep Research at the E.P. Bradley Hospital and Professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at Brown Medical School in Providence, R.I. "The earlier parents can start helping their children with good sleep habits, the easier it will be to sustain them through the teen years."

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

- [School Start Times and Sleep](#)

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