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# Living With Your Teen: Adolescents and Sleep

Teens need sleep, as much as 9 ½ hours each night. However, they're getting less than 7 ½ hours per night on average. The additional sleep teens need can help them perform well in school and help them stay safe.

Sleep patterns change in adolescence, making it harder for teens to fall asleep early and to wake up easily in time for school. They're also faced with a non-negotiable school start time, meaning they have to arise early, but their biological sleep rhythm and other activities may keep them up late and decrease the amount of available sleep time. What can families do?



## Understand sleep phase delay.

In mid-puberty, significant changes in the brain and biological clock affect the ways adolescents sleep. *Sleep phase delay* occurs when the sleep-promoting hormone *melatonin* is secreted in the teen brain later in the evening than for young children or adults. That makes it harder for teens to go to sleep at the times they did when they were younger. Melatonin secretion also turns off later in the morning, so it's harder for them to wake up. Adolescents are often exposed to much late-night stimulation, with bright room lights, hard-driving rock music, computer games and other video displays, TV and phone conversations. This additional activity can lead to hyper-arousal that makes sleep more difficult.

## Be aware of the risks of not enough sleep.

Many teens can't function in school because their bodies are so sleep-deprived that their mental and learning capacities shut down. They may fall asleep in class, preventing them from learning. Lack of sleep negatively affects development in some areas of the brain, leading to difficulty processing information and integrating the skills that guide behavior and regulate emotions. This hinders development of social competence, one of the most important tasks in adolescence. With less ability to make sound judgments on social situations, teens are at risk for using alcohol and drugs and getting involved in sexual activities.

Driving poses another serious danger for sleep-deprived teens. Chronically sleepy adolescents may experience "microsleeps" that delay reaction times and decrease their ability to pay attention. Teens who have fallen asleep driving may be unable to maintain control of the car, causing crashes that result in death or disabling injury. Nationwide, drivers aged 15 to 24 cause more than 1500 drowsiness-related fatal accidents each year.

Other effects of insufficient sleep include:

- academic difficulty
- depressed mood
- irritability
- increased anger
- lower tolerance for frustration

- decreased thinking and emotional control.
- difficulty reading others' emotions and cues.
- difficulty learning new tasks.

### **Develop strategies for helping sleep come more easily.**

Parents and adolescents can work together to develop better sleep habits. Here are some suggestions:

#### **Teens can**

- get into bright light as soon as possible in the morning to signal the brain to wake up.
- avoid bright light in the evening.
- understand their own bodies' sleep rhythms.
- avoid strenuous or attention-needing tasks (such as driving) during sleepy times.
- learn which foods and drinks contain caffeine and stay away from them after noon; avoid other types of stimulants.
- relax before going to bed – avoid heavy reading or computer games within an hour of bedtime.
- avoid falling asleep with the TV on – flickering light can disturb sleep.

#### **Parents can**

- talk with teens about their sleep/wake schedules and the level of their activities.
- help them develop a workable schedule that allows for enough sleep (9-9 ½ hours).
- provide a home environment that's conducive to sleep – no loud late-night activities, TV or music.
- limit phone use close to bedtime.
- provide good role models and practice good sleep habits: pay attention to their own bodies' sleep needs, go to bed earlier.
- maintain age-appropriate sleep schedules for all their children.

#### **Sources:**

American Sleep Disorders Association

National Academy of Sciences; National Academy Press

National Sleep Foundation

Sleep Needs, Patterns and Difficulties of Adolescents: Summary of a Workshop (2000)

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