



Parents Guide to Teenagers and Sleep

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Adolescents are notoriously sleep-deprived, because of a combination of biology, technology and the demands of school and extracurricular activities. This guide outlines how lack of sleep can affect teenagers, and how parents can help them build more sleep into their lives.



How Sleep-Deprived Are Teenagers?

While teenagers need 9.25 hours of sleep to be optimally alert, multiple studies have shown that the vast majority today are living with borderline to severe sleep deprivation.

- According to a 2010 large-scale study published in *The Journal of Adolescent Health*, a scant 8 percent of U.S. high school students get the recommended amount of sleep.
- Some 23 percent get six hours of sleep on an average school night.
- 10 percent get only five hours.

Why Are Teens So Sleep-Deprived?

Biology, technology and societal expectations, including homework and extracurriculars, together create a perfect storm for chronic sleep deprivation. The major contributors to adolescent sleep debt come down to these:

- **Biology:** Along with the more obvious hormonal changes that transform your child into a teen are shifts in the production of melatonin, the sleep hormone. That is why your teenager actually seems more awake at midnight than at dinner, and left alone would probably sleep until ten or eleven. That is the normal circadian rhythm for 15- to 22-year-olds. The problem is compounded when adolescents try to make up for lost sleep on the weekends, sometimes sleeping upwards of 12 hours on Friday and Saturday nights, which only further disrupts their sleep cycle.
- **Technology:** It's not just that Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr and YouTube are distractions that keep kids up later, it's the actual light coming off the electronic devices they're exposed to, especially late at night. Electronics emit a glow called blue light that has a particular frequency. When it hits receptors in the eye, those receptors send a signal to the brain that suppresses the production of melatonin and keeps kids from feeling tired. And adolescents are low on melatonin and start producing it later to begin with.

- **Homework:** Parents are torn between making kids go to bed and encouraging them to finish their work regardless of how long it takes. And for kids who are anxious about their homework, knowing that there may be a peer who stays up later or all night only adds to the anxiety, competitiveness and desire to stay awake. Add to this the stimulating blue light emitted by computers being used to study and write papers, and you've got a wide-awake kid.
- **Overscheduling:** We live in a culture that values activity over sleep. Teens are constantly being told that they have to be “well-rounded,” which means that the more they do, the better their college applications will look. For some kids, being involved in a lot of extracurricular activities may truly be a matter of pursuing a diversity of passions. But either way, sports, clubs, volunteering and after-school jobs on top of classes and homework leave an ever-narrowing window for sleep.
- **Early school start times:** Very early high school start times are common, despite the fact that they run completely counter to the biological needs of adolescents. Multiple studies have shown that high school students aren't functional before 9am.

What Are the Consequences for Teenagers?

Sleep deprivation puts teenagers into a kind of perpetual cloud or haze. That haze can negatively affect a teenager's mood, as well as ability to think, react, regulate their emotions, learn and get along with adults. Half the teens one expert evaluated were so tired in the morning that they showed the same symptoms as patients with narcolepsy, a sleep disorder in which the patient nods off and falls directly into REM sleep. This can result in the following:

- **Increased risk of injury:** According to a National Sleep Foundation Study, drowsiness or fatigue is the principal cause of at least 100,000 traffic accidents each year. One North Carolina state study found that 55 percent of all “fall-asleep” crashes were caused by drivers under the age of 25.
- **Inability to self-regulate:** Along with a lack of sleep goes the ability to exercise self-control — over one's emotions, impulses and mood. Lack of sleep has been linked to aggression, impulsiveness and being short-tempered. It can also produce some of the same symptoms as kids with ADHD, including an inability to sit still, to stay on task and to focus.



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- **Substance use and risky behavior:** Research shows that sleep-deprived teens are more likely to use stimulants like caffeine and nicotine to get through the day, but also to deal with negative moods by self-medicating with alcohol. They're also more likely to engage in unprotected sex and reckless driving than teens who get upwards of seven hours of sleep a night.
- **Mood:** Less sleep also correlates with higher levels of depression, and in turn, kids with depression had problems falling or staying asleep. Since many mental illnesses first show up in the teenage years, doctors worry that severe sleep deprivation can trigger a serious depression in kids who are already predisposed to it. And multiple studies have found that severe sleep debt is linked to suicidal ideation.



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How Can You Help Teens Get More Sleep?

There are lifestyle changes that middle- and high-schoolers can make, and even several small changes can have a big effect on their well-being. Here is some expert advice on how to win back a couple of precious hours a night:

- **Take a stand:** Teenagers will resist, but there's evidence that parental help with limit-setting on study and sleep does help kids make better decisions about managing their time.
- **Encourage consistency:** It's important for your teen to go to bed as close as possible to the same time every night, and to get as close as possible to eight hours of sleep. But it's also important for him to stick to the same schedule — within reason — on the weekends.
- **Limit screen time:** Emphasize the importance of turning off all electronic devices a minimum of one hour before bed. Plan ahead so that homework that needs to be done on a screen is completed by early evening and "off-screen" work is saved for later at night. That also means no "unwinding" by going on Facebook or Instagram. Social media is a great place to find new sources of anxiety to chase away sleep.
- **Discourage snacking:** Adolescents are prone to eating and drinking on an ersatz schedule, as a means to self-regulate, or to stay awake, or just because they can. But the bag of chips or the cookies at 1am, or caffeine any time after dinner — whether or not they help get the essay written — can postpone sleep, and harmfully.
- **Boost the biological clock:** A low dose (2-3 mg) of the sleep hormone melatonin (a non-prescription vitamin which can be purchased at the drugstore) one to two hours before it's time to go to bed may help jumpstart melatonin production that tends to start later at night in adolescents.

- **Simplify:** Teenagers need you to help them set realistic expectations for how many activities they can get involved in without burning out. That means limiting pressure to build the ultimate college resume.
- **Set a good example:** Model good sleep habits for your teens by making sleep part of living a healthy lifestyle — like eating right and exercising regularly.
- **Streamline mornings:** Encourage teenagers to shower, pick out clothes and pack up books before bed so they don't have to spend time doing it in the morning.
- **Pump up productivity:** Show them that using odd bits of time they might otherwise blow off can be fruitful. Also, by breaking homework down into bite-size pieces, say 45-minute blocks with 10-minute breaks to clear one's head, they can get more done and be more relaxed doing it.
- **Keep the bed for sleep:** Experts agree that it's easier to fall asleep and stay asleep if you associate the bed with sleeping. That means encouraging your teenager to work in another room he associates with getting work done.

Additional Resource:

- childmind.org/teenagers



The Child Mind Institute is an independent nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders. Our teams work every day to deliver the highest standards of care, advance the science of the developing brain and empower parents, professionals and policymakers to support children when and where they need it most. Together with our supporters, we're helping children reach their full potential in school and in life. We share all of our resources freely and do not accept any funding from the pharmaceutical industry. Learn more at childmind.org.