

Sleep Tips for Teens

Sleep gives the body time to repair itself and gain energy for the next day. Just as good sleep can maintain your health, poor sleep can jeopardize it. Exhaustion increases a person's risk of accidents and research links sleep problems to obesity, among other health problems. Hormones responsible for sexual maturation and growth are released while sleeping. Research shows that teens that get the least amount of sleep get lower grades than teens that get more sleep. This is because tired teens can't remember what they just learned. Sleep loss decreases the body's ability to extract glucose from the blood stream. Without this stream of basic energy, the region of the brain that is responsible for important higher level functions suffers. These functions include the ability to pay attention, memory, moral reasoning, impulse control, judgment and motivation. Deep sleep allows for dreaming and dreaming allows for the psychological digestion of positive and negative or upsetting thoughts that occur during the day. There are two regions of the brain that process these emotions and thoughts from the day. Research shows that in sleep-deprived teens the positive memory region of the brain is compromised while the negative memory region is not. This causes a failure of the brain to recall pleasant memories in the following days, weeks and months, yet recall gloomy memories just fine; and this memory pattern can lead to clinical depression! Consider the following:

- **Avoid stimulants.** Do not drink caffeinated coffee within four hours of bedtime. Many sodas also have caffeine. Nicotine is a potent stimulant; so if you smoke, which you know you shouldn't, don't do so within two hours of bedtime. Try drinking warmed white milk. Melatonin tablets or valerian teas are natural sedatives with no addictive qualities, but they should not be taken if you are on a mood regulating medication.
- **Work out in the daytime.** Evening exercise increases one's metabolic process rate, which makes it more difficult to fall asleep. On the other hand regular exercise before or after dinner will gradually slow down your metabolism all evening until it hits a stage of sleepiness at just about bedtime.
- **Finish eating dinner and any after dinner snacks at least two to three hours before you go to bed.** During the REM phase of deep sleep all of the energy in your body goes to your brain. However, if there is food in your stomach your body has to first work on digesting that food before it can apply its full energy to the REM stage of deep sleep. Eating too close to bedtime physiologically delays the start of deep sleep.
- **Stick to a schedule.** As tempting as it is to stay up late and sleep in on weekends, staying near the same time every day (including weekends) can make all your sleep more restful and evenly balanced. After a period of several days (of regular sleep and wake times) most people get into a rhythm whereby they can wake up on time for school without an alarm clock. If you're not getting enough sleep and you are feeling sleepy in class do not take a nap when you get home from school. Force yourself to stay awake until 9 pm or later. That way you will be extra tired and better able to get back into a normal sleep pattern.
- **Establish some bedtime routines.** For example, eat a light bedtime snack, write in a journal, do some leisurely reading, listen to quiet music, or do some other relaxing activity that helps you to unwind and be mentally ready to go to sleep. Be sure to always get your

homework done much earlier in the evening. Try taking a hot shower or bath as the warm temperature heats you up and, as you cool, your body relaxes and is ready for sleep.

- **Sleep in a dark, quiet, and temperate environment.** Turn off the lights; including the TV, computer monitor, aquarium light, etc. If you have to get up, turn on the dimmest light that will allow you to move around safely. Light triggers your body to stop producing melatonin, a substance that helps you sleep. Do what you can to keep noise at a minimum. Most people sleep deeper in cool environments (around 68 degrees) with warm blankets. In the winter use a humidifier or cool air vaporizer to reduce dry itchy skin, dry mouth, dry nose, and related breathing difficulties. Consider the use of wearing Breath Right® strips.
- **Reduce your stress at bedtime.** Turn your cell phone off (or switch it to silent mode) at 9:30 pm on school nights! If you have a friend who needs advice past your planned bedtime tell them to talk with you in the morning. Better yet refer them to the school counselor. Also avoid getting into conflicts with important people at the end of the night on the phone or computer and don't watch the evening news or a horror movie just before bedtime. Disturbing thoughts, images or news may keep you awake. Going to bed worrying about a problem not only delays sleep but also makes sleep less restful. It's better to figure out a solution to a problem or worry about a problem much earlier in the evening. If you lie awake for more than 15 minutes, get up and write down concerns on a pad of paper. Plan to address those concerns the next day. Then go back to bed and turn the clock so you don't see the time and fret over the time you're spending awake. Now imagine a pleasant visual scene or experience, concentrate on that and hold it in your mind as long as you can. Keep doing this until you naturally fall asleep. Consider listening to a relaxation sound track.
- **Get outside light in the morning as soon as possible.** Sleep near a window and angle the window blinds open for morning sunshine (but not to the extent that you can see a street light or neon sign outside). Inside light doesn't work as well at waking you up in the morning as does outside light; even a cloudy day is about 1,000 times stronger than indoor lighting. In the winter it may still be dark outside when you get up so the next best thing is to turn on a bright light. Consider the use of a timer on a lamp if your audio alarm system doesn't always wake you on time. To change when you automatically awake each day, you can reset your "biological clock" (circadian rhythm) by getting at least 45 minutes of outside light as soon as you wake up. Light absorbed through the eyes is what works the best in resetting the biological clock.
- **Don't regularly force yourself out of bed too soon** (unless, of course, staying in bed will make you late for school). You should get at least 8 to 9 hours of sleep each day. Being just an hour or two short of quality sleep can make you feel exhausted throughout the day, less able to focus, and less able to learn in school.
- **If you are having serious problems falling asleep, sleeping soundly, and/or getting out of bed in the morning you should let your parents know, see a counselor, or ask to see a doctor who specializes in sleep problems.**
- **For more information on getting better sleep visit the National Sleep Foundation at: www.sleepfoundation.org**