

SLEEP AND TEENS

Important Facts about Sleep and Teens:

Teens need about 9 hours of sleep/night. If they get less, it leads to impaired cognitive, emotional and physical functioning. For example, driving after being awake for 17 hours is similar to driving while intoxicated.

The brain does not retain information until it is processed during sleep. For example, what you learn in class on Monday you will NOT remember best on Monday afternoon, or even Tuesday morning after a good night's sleep. Instead, you will remember it best on Wednesday, assuming you had sufficient sleep both nights.

Two-thirds of teens are physiologically sleep-phase delayed relative to adults; their ideal awake time is around 9 AM to midnight.

Trying to "make up for lost sleep" on weekends doesn't work, and often backfires. Sleeping in on weekends creates a vicious cycle: teens will be even less sleepy at bedtime and have more difficulty waking up the next morning. If they sleep until noon, for example, they won't be sleepy the next night until 2-4 AM!

Tips for Improving Sleep Habits:

Turn it off. Pick a time to turn everything off at night. Constant connectivity with e-mail, text messaging, video games, TV etc. contributes significantly to lack of sleepiness.

Reduce late-night exposure to light, sound and food. Snacks are okay, but not big meals. Wear sunglasses for an hour before bedtime to encourage sleepiness.

Sleep environment: Make the bedroom a comfortable, calm place. If at all possible, do not have the bedroom be a "multi-function" space for play, study and sleep.

Homework: Do not leave homework for late at night.

Write it down: Make a list of what you have to do, so you can "let go of it" at bedtime. Alternatively or in addition, keep a diary or journal to clear your head.

Darkness: Listening to soft music or a book on tape at bedtime is fine but keep the lights off.

Weekends: This is perhaps the most difficult but effective measure to keep on a reasonable sleep schedule: On weekends, get up within 2 hours of normal. Get light exposure and exercise as soon as you wake up in the morning; it helps to reset your clock.

Light: If you consistently experience trouble waking up, try early morning light therapy. The Sunbox Company in Gaithersburg makes a light that is efficacious, attaches to the inside of a hat brim, and is worn for only 20 minutes.

Motivate yourself. Remind yourself that you will definitely become less organized, more susceptible to depression, and less effective in school if you do not get enough sleep.

More information: Check the National Sleep Foundation website, www.nationalsleepfoundation.org.