

# Say Hello to a Good Night's Sleep

Study after study documents that American adults, teenagers and children are not getting enough shut eye. Are we asleep at the wheel? **BY MARIA T. ARANDA, PH.D.**

**FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS**, the effects of sleep deprivation are well-known and far-reaching. Decreased sleep is associated with an increase in health problems and a decrease in academic achievement. For sleepy teens, drowsy driving causes car accidents and avoidable injuries. Need more reasons to convince your teenager to get to bed early? How about this: lack of sleep also increases acne and is associated with unhealthy eating and obesity.

If your child is not getting enough sleep, the first task is to figure out why. Is he constantly getting up during the night and ending up in your bed? Is she going to bed at a decent hour but cannot fall asleep? Is he going to bed too late because of long nights of texting, instant chatting, Facebooking or video game playing?

There are many reasons why a child's sleep can be disrupted. Some can be addressed by parents at home; other reasons should prompt parents to seek outside help. If you're unsure

what to do, a good place to start is to consult with your pediatrician.

What can parents do to increase healthy sleep habits? First, make sure that your child's room is conducive to sleep. Keep it cool, quiet and dark. Invest in dark shades if necessary, as the amount of available light regulates melatonin, which signals the body it's time to sleep. Second, 30 minutes prior to sleep, do not allow any screen time. The artificial light emitted from electronics actually suppresses melatonin production. Third, create a nightly bedtime routine and on weekends avoid deviating from it very much. One idea is to allow teens to stay up later on Fridays and sleep in on Saturdays. Encourage them to wake earlier on Sundays, however, so they are not too far off their regular school-week routine.

For children who have been going to sleep late and who want to fall asleep earlier, make bedtime changes incrementally. For the first three days, have your child go to bed 15 minutes earlier. For days four through six, bring

## RECOMMENDED SLEEP FOR CHILDREN

**1-3-YEARS-OLD:** 12-14 hours  
**3-6-YEARS-OLD:** 10-12 hours  
**7-12-YEARS-OLD:** 10-11 hours  
**12-18-YEARS-OLD:** 8-9 hours

their bedtime up an additional 15 minutes, and continue until they reach the desired bedtime.

Teen sleeping patterns are more challenging to shift. Biological sleep patterns shift later during adolescence, driving many teens to avoid asleep before 11 p.m. School schedules, unfortunately, don't cooperate. To counteract their biological clocks, teens should keep nighttime activities relaxing and less-stimulating whenever possible. For children who cannot fall asleep because of worry or because their brains won't "shut-off," keeping a diary where they write their worries may help. So does allotting 15 minutes of daily "worry-time," when they can simply vent their anxieties.

Fortunately, there are many resources that offer sleep-inducing strategies. One good resource for elementary and early middle school children is *What to Do When You Dread Your Bed* by Dawn Huebner, Ph.D. This parent and kid-friendly book explains many of the reasons for poor sleep and concrete ways to overcome them.

There are, however, many other sleep difficulties that may require outside, professional assistance. Narcolepsy, insomnia, Restless Leg Syndrome and sleep apnea are all conditions that require medical attention. Similarly, chronic and disruptive worry or oppositional behavior in younger children may require a consult with a psychologist. Regardless of the reasons for poor sleep, many ways exist to promote more shut-eye.

Our brains are speaking loudly to us. Perhaps it's time to wake up and get the sleep we need.



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