

# Sleep in Adolescents (13–18 Years)

## WHAT TO EXPECT

The vast majority of adolescents do not get enough sleep. Teens need 8.5 to 9.5 hours of sleep. However, the average amount of sleep that teens get is about 7 hours on school nights. Even on weekends and holidays, when they try to “catch up,” teens get just 8 or 9 hours of sleep. Teens are missing about 2 hours of sleep every night, and it accumulates over time.

There are a number of reasons why teens do not get enough sleep:

- **Shift in sleep schedule:** Around the time of puberty, there is a normal shift in an adolescent’s internal clock of about 2 hours. This means that a 14-year-old, who used to fall asleep easily at 9:00 p.m., will have difficulty falling asleep before 11:00 p.m. The time that teens naturally wake up also shifts 2 hours later. This makes it extremely hard for them to get up early, before 7:00 a.m. or 8:00 a.m.
- **Early high school start times:** At the same time that teens’ internal clocks are shifting later, they are often starting high school which starts even earlier in the morning. Some high schools start as early as 7:00 a.m. This means that some teens have to get up as early as 5:00 a.m. to get to school. Not only does this result in not getting enough sleep, but also requires adolescents to get up for school when they are least alert. They end up in school during the 2 hours of their natural sleep time.
- **Social and school obligations:** This tendency toward falling asleep later is greatly compounded by homework, sports, after-school activities (often occurring during the evening), and socializing. Working after school is another common cause of not getting enough sleep. In addition, many teens spend time on social media and on their computers or smartphones even after lights out. All of these activities tend to increase as teens get older. High school seniors get the least amount of sleep, just when they need to be at their best academically.
- **Erratic sleep schedule:** Many teens stay up later on nonschool nights. They also often “sleep in” on weekends until noon or 1:00 p.m., in an attempt to “catch up” on lost sleep. Although this may seem like a good idea, it can contribute to sleep problems. By going to bed so much later on Friday and Saturday, it makes it even more difficult to fall asleep at a reasonable time on Sunday night. It’s like the “jet lag” you might experience from flying from the East Coast to California and back every weekend.
- **Caffeine:** Teens are increasingly turning to caffeine. They are having coffee and energy drinks to combat the effects of not getting enough sleep. Some are buying “super-caffeinated” products, like caffeine pills and gums. And some are taking prescription stimulants, such as Ritalin and Adderall. Not only are these things potentially addictive and physically harmful (and in some cases, even illegal), but also they may disrupt sleep at night.

As a result, most adolescents are chronically sleep deprived. Not getting enough sleep will affect your teen’s functioning.

- **Mood:** Sleep-deprived teens are often moody, irritable, and cranky. They are more likely to get frustrated and upset. Not getting enough sleep has also been linked to depression in teens.
- **Behavior:** Teens who are sleep deprived are often more impulsive. They are more likely to do risky things, such as drinking, driving fast, and other dangerous activities.

- **Thinking skills:** Not getting enough sleep may result in problems with attention, memory, decision-making, organization, and creativity. All of these are important for success in school.
- **School performance:** Many high-achieving, college-bound high school students state that they “have to” stay up late in order to get their homework done and participate in extracurricular and athletic activities. However, studies actually show that students who get better grades sleep *more*, not less. Not getting enough sleep in teens is also associated with getting to school late and missing school, as well as poor performance on standardized tests. Teens who are sleep-deprived are also less efficient. Thus a cycle develops in which a student takes longer to complete the same amount of work, leading to staying up later, and starting the vicious cycle all over again.
- **Drowsy driving:** Teens, especially older teenage boys, are at the highest risk for falling asleep at the wheel. The most common drowsy driving accident involves a single vehicle with a single driver who drives off the road. These accidents most often happen late at night and in the middle of the afternoon. So don’t be fooled that just because it is bright daylight, your teen won’t fall asleep at the wheel. All teens that are not getting enough sleep are at risk. This is especially true when a beer or two, marijuana, and relative driving inexperience compound lack of sleep.

## HOW TO HELP TEENS SLEEP WELL

- **Maintain a regular sleep schedule:** Your teen should go to bed at about the same time (within an hour or so) on weekdays and on weekends. Your teen should go to bed early enough so that she can get her required 9 hours of sleep.
- **Avoid “sleeping-in” on weekends:** Although catching up on some sleep on the weekends can be helpful, sleeping in until noon on Saturday and Sunday will make it hard for your teen to get back on a school schedule in time for Monday morning classes.
- **Make sleep a priority:** Keep an eye on potential “sleep stealers” like late-night activities, after-school employment, and “after-hours” electronics use. Help your teen manage her time better, so that she can get to bed on time.
- **Take early afternoon naps:** For teens who just can’t arrange their schedules to get enough sleep every night, a brief nap (30 minutes or less) in the afternoon can temporarily help sleepiness. However, this is not a good long-term solution to the problem of chronically not getting enough sleep.
- **Turn off electronics:** Late night television viewing, social media use, text messaging, and similar activities at bedtime can result in problems falling and staying asleep. Even the low light level of a computer or television screen can shift your teen’s internal clock even later. Ideally, all electronic devices should be removed from your teen’s bedroom.
- **Avoid caffeine, smoking, alcohol, and drugs:** All of these substances can disrupt sleep. Make sure that your teen understands that caffeine does *not* counteract or reverse the effects of alcohol.
- **Discuss the dangers of drowsy driving:** Do not allow your teen to drive without getting enough sleep or to ride in a car with a sleep-deprived driver.
- **Contact your teen’s doctor:** Speak to your teen’s doctor if she has difficulties falling asleep or staying asleep, snores, or seems excessively sleepy during the day.