

Teens and sleep: Why you need it and how to get enough



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Tired of always feeling sleepy?

- Having trouble staying awake in History class?
- Find it impossible to get out of bed for school on Monday mornings?
- Have an unavoidable nap-attack the second you get home from school in the afternoon?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you are not alone. Many teenagers feel that they are always tired. In medicine, the word sleepiness is used for the feeling when you want or need to sleep in places and at times when you should not be asleep (such as History class!).

Everyone experiences sleepiness at some time or another. Usually, but not always, the reason is obvious, such as too many late nights in a row. But up to 40% of teens feel that they are too sleepy most of the time.

Although there are some medical causes of sleepiness, **most sleepy teens simply do not get enough sleep**. Scientific research shows that to function at your best, **you need between 9 hours and 10 hours of sleep every day**. This is more sleep than you needed before you were a teenager, and it is more than you will need when you are an adult.

Teens need more sleep because they are in a time of very fast physical, intellectual and emotional growth.

Although getting enough sleep may not seem that big of a deal, medical research shows that **teens who usually get too little sleep are more likely to struggle in school**. Why? Being tired affects your memory, your concentration and, most seriously, your motivation (the desire to accomplish a goal).

Overtired teens are more likely to be involved in car crashes and other accidents because sleepiness affects reaction times. Research also shows that too little sleep can affect your mood. Simply put – **teens who do not get enough sleep are more likely to get**

depression, which is a serious medical condition.

Why is it so hard to get enough sleep?

There are many reasons. Some are under your control and some are not. In Canada, most high schools start very early in the day, some before 8:00 am. When you think about all the other things you need to do (homework, socializing, sports, chores, part-time jobs, etc), getting to bed early enough to get 9 hours of sleep seems almost impossible.

Teens in Canada can have very busy lives, and some may actually have too much to do – they are ‘overscheduled’. Very busy teens still need to have some downtime to relax, unwind and spend time with friends (in person or on the Internet). This usually happens at the expense of sleeping. Many teens also crave the quiet privacy they find late at night when parents have gone to bed.

Here are some suggestions that may be helpful if you are tired of always feeling sleepy:

- Have a relaxing bedtime routine. Always fall asleep in your bed, and not in front of the television. At bedtime, your room should be cool, dark and quiet.
- On weekends, no matter how late you go to bed, try to get up within 2 hours to 4 hours of your usual wake time. This is especially important if you have trouble falling asleep on Sunday nights.
- Try to be in your bed with the lights out at least 8 hours per day. Many teens need 9 hours or 10 hours to not feel sleepy during the day.
- Try to go to bed at about the same time every night.
- Open the curtains or turn on the lights as soon as you get up in the morning.
- Get exercise every day, but avoid very hard exercise in the evening.

Information for teens

- Make sure you are not overscheduled. Have you taken on more than you can do? Do you still have some time for fun and getting enough sleep?
- Avoid all products with caffeine (coffee, tea and colas) after mid-afternoon.
- Avoid napping during the day. If you do, keep it short (less than 30 min). Definitely do not nap after dinner.
- Have a light snack (such as a glass of milk) before bed.
- Use your bed for sleeping only. Do not do homework, watch television or spend time talking on the phone while in your bed.
- Avoid using any products to help you sleep (including alcohol, herbal products or over-the-counter sleep aids).

For most teenagers, the advice above will help you get enough sleep to feel energetic during the day. If not, there are a few other things to consider. Although it is unusual, there are some medical conditions that can affect your sleep and energy levels.

See your doctor if:

- You have feelings of sadness that do not seem to go away.
- You have worried feelings that make it hard to focus on other things.
- You have trouble falling asleep at night despite trying the tips in this document.
- You wake up through the night or early in the morning and cannot get back to sleep.
- You continue to feel like you have no energy despite getting enough sleep.
- Your sleepiness affects your responsibilities – such as not being able to go to school, to get to work on time or spend time with your friends.
- You feel sick in other ways (such as headaches, loss of appetite or have other symptoms you cannot explain).

SOURCE: Developed by the Canadian Paediatric Society's Adolescent Health Committee.

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