

what you

NEED TO KNOW about...

Sleep for Youth

Sleep is critical for physical and mental health, but many youth just don't get enough. Lack of sleep can cause a number of health problems. Trouble sleeping can also be a symptom of physical or mental health problems. This fact sheet will help you make sure your teen is getting a good night's sleep.

How does sleep usually happen?

The brain has an internal clock that tells us when we need to sleep. When it becomes dark outside in the evening, this clock is triggered to make melatonin. Melatonin is a brain chemical that makes us feel sleepy.

Children's sleep patterns change when they reach adolescence. Their inner clocks shift and this may make them want to stay up later. It may make them want to sleep later the next morning. This can be difficult if they have an early school start time; so families may need to discuss how to reasonably accommodate these changing sleep patterns.

How much sleep does my teen need?

Every teen is different, but most youth between 12-18 years need **8 ½ to 9 ½ hours of sleep each night**. On average though, they're getting closer to 7.

What happens if my teen doesn't get enough sleep?

All sorts of problems can happen when youth don't get enough sleep. Lack of sleep can cause:

- Mood problems (like irritability)
- Trouble concentrating
- Physical health problems (like getting sick more often)
- Hyperactivity. While adults usually feel tired and don't have much energy when sleep-deprived, youth can become hyperactive.

It's easy to see how these difficulties could have a big impact on school, behaviour and mental health.

How can I make sure my teen gets enough sleep?

Believe it or not, working to keep a warm, positive relationship with your teen can help. It's a deep human need to feel close connections with our parents. Problems in this relationship can add to anxiety, making sleep more difficult.

Younger children have a strong need to be close to a parent, especially at bedtime. This may be the result of how humans have evolved over time.

Thousands of years ago, parents kept their sleeping children close to protect them from predatory animals. Being with parents meant safety. In today's world, children still need this physical connection to parents, which gradually changes into a need to be emotionally attached.

The need for physical closeness can return, though, when teens are feeling a lot of stress. Teens may even surprise their unsuspecting parents by crawling into bed with them. But this can be a good thing, and shows a teen's healthy need to reconnect at a difficult time. One of the best ways to help youth sleep well is to meet their underlying need for attachment, through either physical or emotional closeness.

Children and youth need to feel that their parents 'love them no matter what' (unconditional love). Unconditional love is a powerful way to make sure your relationship with your teen stays strong and close.

You can show your child or teen unconditional love by:

- Accepting your child for who she is
- Respecting his likes and dislikes
- Spending lots of time together and taking an interest in her life
- Supporting his interests, not pressuring your teen into becoming more like someone else
- Still giving love and attention when your teen messes up. This doesn't mean that you must approve of everything your teen does. Not everything is OK. You need to convey your love and concern for your teen as a person, but discuss the behaviour separately.



In the morning

- Start the day with a warm and affectionate "hello". This helps to start everyone's day on a positive note. Kind words, a smile or hug, are nice ways to reconnect first thing in the morning - even with grumbling teens.
- Try your best to keep the same wakeup time every day (weekends too). The body's internal clock works best with regular bedtimes and wakeup times. When youth don't get enough sleep during the week, they often need to catch up on sleep over the weekend. It's better to aim for earlier bedtimes during the week, so they don't become sleep-deprived.
- Youth can be busy on weeknights with homework, sports, work and other activities. Sometimes they have too much on their plate. Consider limiting their extra activities to perhaps just 1 or 2 per semester. At times when youth are very busy, they may need to get a little extra sleep on the weekend - however, on Sundays you may want to try to get them up at a reasonable morning time. This way they'll be more likely to go to bed at a reasonable time Sunday night for school.

During the day

- **Physical activity** - Try to help your teen get enough exercise. Being active as a family is good for everyone, and helps to build positive relationships. Throw a ball around outside; play road hockey; take a walk or a yoga class together. Physical activity with your teen is a great way to connect and spend time together. Youth need at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day. But timing is important- physical activity late in the evening can make it more difficult to fall asleep.
- **Healthy meals and snacks** - Canada's food guide will help you plan balanced meals and snacks. For more information, visit www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php
- **Limit naps** - Some youth are really tired when they get home from school. A short nap can be helpful, but long naps will interfere with night time sleep. Keep after-school naps short; no more than 30-60 minutes.
- **Avoid or limit caffeine and energy drinks** - While your teen may rely on these drinks to stay alert during the day, the caffeine can further disrupt sleeping patterns

- **Talk about stress** - Stress or emotional struggles can interfere with sleep. Give your teen a chance to talk with you about their feelings. Try to listen and validate these feelings. Ask your teen how she'd like you to support her. Try to avoid jumping in with advice or criticism. Although conflict between family members is common, you can reassure your teen. You can say that you will work through these difficulties; and even though you disagree, you love them no matter what.
- **Work out a reasonable time for bed** - You'll need to work this out with your teen. It's much easier to have this kind of discussion if you've built a strong, warm relationship with your teen. Spending positive, quality time with youth will help build this.

To talk about sleep with your teen, you might start by discussing their routines. For example, "It must be tough to get through a long day of school when you're so tired." Ask your teen if she would like your advice, or if she would rather that you simply listen. Let them know that you've learned a few things about getting a good night's sleep, and offer to share that information when your teen is ready.

If your teen is ready to discuss sleep, try this together. Figure out what time she needs to get up in the morning. Then count back 8 ½ - 9 ½ hours from this wake-up time. Suggest that your teen 'aim' for this as a weeknight bedtime. Gently encourage at least 9 hours of sleep each night.



Evening: helping your teen unwind

- Connecting before directing. Try and do everything you can to maintain a warm and positive relationship with your child or teen. Your child or teen needs to feel important to you, and feel safe talking to you about feelings and worries. Sleep problems can arise or get worse if your child or teen feels they can't turn to you; or if there is a lot of conflict between the two of you. Conflict can also make your teen less likely to accept your suggestions to improve sleep.
 - If you have problems in your relationship with your child or teen, consider getting help from: a trusted friend; family member; counselor; or therapist.
- Avoid arguments in the hours before your teen goes to bed. If you must discuss something difficult, try to bring it up during the day. Difficult conversations close to bedtime can sometimes lead to arguments. These arguments can make sleep harder for both of you.

Gently encourage your teen to:

- Turn off all electronics (TV, video games, computers, or any screens that emit light) about 1 hour before bed. It's best to keep TVs and computers out of bedrooms altogether. Watching TV, movies, playing video games and connecting with friends on social media *stimulate* the brain - instead of letting it *slow down*. The light from the screens also stops the brain from making melatonin (the hormone that promotes sleep).
- Relax by reading or listening to quiet music.
- Go to bed when sleepy. Your teen should associate bed with sleeping. Lying awake in bed is not helpful, and can actually make it more difficult to get to sleep. If your teen can't get to sleep in about 20 minutes, she should get up for about 30 minutes and do something non-stimulating.

Youth may get a better sleep if they try these ideas:

- **In the dark** - Darkness causes our brains to make the melatonin needed for falling asleep. Curtains or blinds should block out light. Some people like to wear 'eye shades' over their eyes. If your teen has been having trouble falling asleep, they can try sunglasses or special low blue light glasses. These glasses block blue light, and may help the brain produce melatonin.

- **When it's quiet** - While some children and youth need complete silence, others like some background noise. Quiet sounds from a fan or radio may help with sleep.
- **Without watching the clock** - If there is a clock in the room, make sure your teen can't see the time from the bed.
- **Without pets in the bed** - Although many youth like sleeping with pets, studies show that pets in the bed can disturb sleep. If your teen is having trouble with sleep, find another place for the dog or cat to sleep.

Here are some things to avoid so your teen can get a better sleep:

- **Caffeine or alcohol** - Both of these can interfere with sleep. It's best to avoid caffeine after noon, and to avoid alcohol within 4 hours of bedtime. If your child is having sleep problems since starting new medications (such as for ADHD), you should speak with your child's doctor.
- **Too much to drink close to bedtime** - A full bladder before bed means having to get up for a trip to the bathroom. This interferes with sleep.

Helpful websites

About Kids Health, www.aboutkidshealth.ca/En?HealthAZ/Pages/default.aspx?name=s

Nationwide Children's, www.nationwidechildrens.org/sleep-education

Caring for Kids, www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/teens_and_sleep

Sleep for Kids, <http://www.sleepforkids.org/index.html>

Better Nights, Better Days, www.betternightsbetterdays.ca

About this Document

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Disclaimer: Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.

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