Sleepy Teens

Teens are having a harder time staying awake these days because most of them are not getting enough sleep. The most recent recommendation from the National Sleep Foundation is that teens, aged 14 to 17, need eight to 10 hours a night and 18- to 25-year-olds need seven to nine hours.

Many things contribute to lack of sleep. Too much caffeine, too much electronic stimulation, stress and early school starts play havoc with a good night’s sleep.

Dr. Marcel Deray, a pediatric neurologist and director of the sleep disorders center at Miami Children's Hospital, believes that later school start times — even an hour later — could help teens get more sleep. Teens naturally go to sleep later, he said, due to their sleep cycles and the release of the hormone melatonin. “When we fall asleep, melatonin goes up. Teens make it later, so they tend to be night owls,” Deray said. Starting school an hour later is an approach favored by the American Academy of Pediatrics and would likely help, he added.

Sleep is important for a number of reasons. In deep sleep, your body goes into restorative mode. Breathing slows, blood pressure drops, muscles relax and the blood supply to muscles increases. Energy is restored and growth hormones are released. This is when tissue growth and repair occurs, a very important time for fast-growing teens. Sleep has been called food for the brain. During sleep, important brain activity occurs and cortisol levels fall, helping you be more alert the next day.

Sleep also contributes to a healthy immune system. Teens who don’t get enough sleep tend to get sick more often. Sleep helps balance our appetites by helping to regulate levels of specific hormones, which play a role in our feelings of hunger and fullness. So when we’re sleep-deprived, we commonly feel the need to eat more, especially more sweets and fried foods, leading to weight gain.
Not sleeping enough has other grave consequences such as limiting our ability to learn, listen, concentrate and solve problems. It becomes easy to forget important information like names, numbers, homework or a date with a special person. It can affect performance in sports or activities we enjoy. Lack of sleep can contribute to acne and other skin problems. It can lead to aggressive or inappropriate behavior such as yelling at friends or being impatient with teachers or family, create moodiness and depression. Lack of sleep can heighten the effects of alcohol and generally increases the use of caffeine and nicotine. Sleep affects how we look, feel and perform on a daily basis, and can have a major impact on our overall quality of life.

Drowsiness and falling asleep at the wheel causes more than 100,000 car crashes every year. According to the National Sleep Foundation, being sleep-deprived can be compared to driving with a blood alcohol content of .08 percent, which is illegal for drivers in many states. Drowsiness can make operating equipment dangerous, too.

So what to do? Make sleep a priority. Decide what needs to change to get enough sleep to stay healthy, happy and smart. Naps can help, if you plan them right. Naps that are too long or too close to bedtime can interfere with your regular sleep. No pills, vitamins or drinks can replace good sleep. Consuming caffeine close to bedtime can hurt your sleep, so avoid coffee, tea, sodas, energy drinks and chocolate late in the day. Nicotine and alcohol will also interfere with your sleep.

Establish a bed and wake time and stick to it, coming as close as you can on the weekends. A consistent sleep schedule will help you feel less tired since it allows your body to get in sync with its natural patterns. It’s easier to fall asleep at bedtime with a routine. Don’t eat, drink or exercise within a few hours of bedtime. Don’t leave homework for the last minute. Try to avoid the TV, computer and telephone in the hour before bedtime. Stick to quiet, calm activities, and you’ll fall asleep much more easily. Try taking a bath or shower (this will leave you extra time in the morning) or reading a book.

Sleeping is far from being “unproductive.” It plays an important role in how enjoyable, energetic and successful our lives can be.

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