

Sleep Problems in Teens

Most teens spend too much time texting, on the computer or chatting with friends until the wee hours of the morning. Over time, nights of missed sleep can build into a sleep deficit. Teens with a sleep deficit are unable to concentrate, study and work effectively. They can also experience emotional problems, like depression.

What happens during sleep?

As we sleep, our brains pass through 5 stages of sleep. Together, stages 1, 2, 3, 4 and REM (rapid eye movement) sleep make up a sleep cycle. One complete sleep cycle lasts about 90 to 100 minutes. So during an average night's sleep, a person will experience about 4 or 5 cycles of sleep.

Stages 1 and 2 are periods of light sleep from which a person can easily be awakened. During these stages, eye movements slow down and eventually stop, heart and breathing rates slow down, and body temperature decreases. Stages 3 and 4 are deep sleep stages. It's more difficult to awaken someone during these stages, and when awakened, a person will often feel groggy and disoriented for a few minutes. Stages 3 and 4 are the most refreshing of the sleep stages — it is this type of sleep that we crave when we are very tired.

The final stage of the sleep cycle is known as REM sleep because of the rapid eye movements that occur during this stage. During REM sleep, other physical changes take place. Breathing becomes rapid, the heart beats faster and the limb muscles don't move. This is the stage of sleep when a person has the most vivid dreams.

What prevents an early bedtime?

Research shows that teens need 9 hours of sleep a night. So, a teen who wakes up for school at 6 a.m. would have to go to bed at 9 p.m. to reach the 9-hour mark. Studies have found that many teens have trouble falling asleep that early, though. It's not because they don't want to sleep. It's because their brains naturally work on later schedules and aren't ready for bed.

During adolescence, the body's circadian rhythm (an internal biological clock) is reset, telling a teen to fall asleep later at night and wake up later in the morning. This change in the circadian rhythm seems to be due to the fact that the brain hormone melatonin is produced later at night in teens than it is for kids and adults, making it harder for teens to fall asleep.

Sometimes this delay in the sleep-wake cycle is so severe that it affects a person's daily functioning. In those cases it's called delayed sleep phase syndrome, also known as "night

owl" syndrome. And if your sleep-deprived teen brings mobile devices into bed, surfing or texting late into the night, the light exposure could also disrupt circadian rhythm and make it harder to sleep.

Changes in the body clock aren't the only reason teens lose sleep, though. Read on to learn about some of the biggest causes of sleep deprivation.

Insomnia

It's common for teenagers to have insomnia (difficulty falling or staying asleep) from time to time. But if insomnia lasts for a month or longer with no relief, doctors consider it chronic. Chronic insomnia can be caused by a number of different problems, including medical conditions, mental-health problems, medication side effects or substance abuse.

Periodic limb movement disorder and restless legs syndrome

Teens with these conditions find their sleep is disrupted by leg (or, less frequently, arm) movements, leaving them tired or irritable from lack of sleep.

In the case of periodic limb movement disorder (PLMD), these movements are involuntary twitches or jerks. They're called involuntary because the person isn't consciously controlling them and is often unaware of the movement.

Teens with restless legs syndrome (RLS) actually feel physical sensations in their limbs, such as tingling, itching, cramping or burning. The only way they can relieve these feelings is by moving their legs or arms to get rid of the discomfort.

Doctors can treat PLMD and RLS with medications. For some teens, treating an iron deficiency can make the conditions go away.

Obstructive sleep apnea

This sleep disorder causes a person to stop breathing temporarily during sleep. One common cause of obstructive sleep apnea is enlarged tonsils or adenoids (tissues located in the passage that connects the nose and throat). Being overweight or obese also can lead someone to develop obstructive sleep apnea.

Teens with obstructive sleep apnea might snore, have difficulty breathing and even sweat heavily during sleep. Because it disrupts sleep, someone with sleep apnea may feel extremely sleepy or irritable during the day.

Reflux

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) is another common culprit of sleep loss. With GERD, stomach acids

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move backward up into the esophagus, producing the uncomfortable, burning sensation known as heartburn.

GERD symptoms can be worse when a person is lying down. Even if someone doesn't notice the feelings of heartburn during sleep, the discomfort it causes can still interfere with the sleep cycle.

Nightmares

Most teens have nightmares on occasion. But frequent nightmares can disrupt sleep patterns by waking someone during the night.

Some things can trigger more frequent nightmares, including certain medications, drugs or alcohol. Ironically, sleep deprivation also can be a cause. The most common triggers for more frequent nightmares are emotional, such as stress or anxiety.

Narcolepsy

Teens with narcolepsy are often very sleepy during the day and have sleep "attacks" that may make them suddenly fall asleep, lose muscle control or see vivid dreamlike images while dozing off or waking up. Nighttime sleep may be disrupted, with frequent awakenings throughout the night.

Narcolepsy can be disturbing because teens fall asleep without warning, making it hazardous to do things like ride a bike or drive. A teen's schooling, work or social life can be affected by the unusual sleep patterns.

How to help

Different sleep problems are treated differently. Some can be treated with medications, whereas others can be helped by special techniques such as light therapy (where someone sits in front of a lightbox for a certain amount of time each day) or other practices that can help reset a person's body clock.

When teens have sleep problems, doctors often encourage them to make lifestyle changes like turning off the cell phone or computer before bed, cutting down on caffeine, or avoiding violent video games or movies at night.