

Sleep for Teenagers

Everyone has a Circadian rhythm. That's basically an internal clock that is set by the brain. The Circadian rhythm is linked to the day-night cycle and makes humans stay awake during the day and sleep during the night. However, during puberty, that internal clock shifts, partly because of all the hormonal changes happening in the body. Specifically, there is a change in when the brain releases the sleep hormone melatonin. This hormone helps regulate the sleep cycle and is released later at night in teens than in adults. So it's easier for teens to stay up later than it is for adults.

A common presentation, especially among adolescents, is delayed sleep phase syndrome (DSPS). This sleep disturbance is defined by a sleep phase that is shifted later than is customary or desired. DSPS often results from staying up late and "sleeping in" on weekends, leaving a teenager unable to fall asleep until the early hours of the morning and struggling to wake in time for school. Sleep onset, duration, and quality are usually normal if the adolescent is allowed to awaken spontaneously on weekends or vacation, but school days pose considerable difficulty. Adolescents with DSPS often have a history of being tardy or absent from school and may fall asleep in class when they do attend. Treatment of mild DSPS involves gradually waking the person earlier in the morning (including weekends) to create a mild sleep deficit, and then fading the bedtime earlier in the evening.

The following steps may be useful in getting teenager's sleep cycles back to normal.

1. Go to bed later (11pm+) when you are feeling sleepy
2. Learn to catch the wave of sleepiness which comes in 60 to 90 minute cycles
3. Get up at the same time during week days (i.e., 6.30-7.30 am) and no more than one hour later on weekends (i.e., 7.30 – 8.30 am).
4. Stop school work 2 hours before bed. Also avoid the computer, telephone chats with friends and reduce your bright light exposure. Besides being stimulating, the bright light from screens, such as computer screens, can interfere with production of the sleep hormone melatonin.
5. Develop a bed time routine 2 hours before bed (i.e., non-stimulating reading or TV, talking to family members, ironing uniforms, preparing for the next day, brushing teeth etc.). Doing the same sequence of things nightly before turning in helps cue your brain that it's time to sleep.
6. Limit your intake of caffeine and sugar in the evening.
7. Make your bedroom a relaxed place. Keep it dark, and quiet. Consider replacing your room's light bulb to 60-40W. Definitely no TV in the bed room. It is important to associate the bedroom with sleep.
8. Wrap up sports or exercise more than three hours before bedtime.
9. Try not to eat or drink at least two hours before bed.
10. By applying relaxation or meditation exercises during the day, you will reduce your overall stress levels, and find it easier to fall asleep at night.
11. In the mornings get exposure to natural light. This helps to wake you up and reset the body clock.
12. As sleep patterns improve (i.e., sleeping better from 11pm to 7am), it is OK to go to bed earlier than 11pm when you are feeling sleepy.