

Sleepy Teens

14-year-old Brooke Erickson likes to sleep. She has to be at school early on weekdays. On the weekends, she wants to sleep as long as she wants.

Brooke's mom does not agree. She thinks that Brooke should get up at the same time every day. This way she'll get used to being up early.

New research says that both Brooke and her mom are right.

Sleeping late means sleeping more than two hours later than a person would normally wake up. Sleeping late on weekends can mess up the body's sleep/wake cycles. Sleeping late in the mornings makes it harder to fall asleep at night. Staying up later at night makes the body tired. Then it gets even harder to get up the next morning. Wake up and going to bed at the same times every day. This makes it easier for the body to get the rest it needs.

Most teenagers don't get as much sleep as they need. The average teenager needs 8 to 9 hours of sleep each night. The average teenager only gets 6 to 7 hours of sleep on school nights.

Why Being Tired is a Problem

Being too tired leads to many problems. Some of the problems are minor. Some are very serious. Missing out on sleep can make someone feel grumpy. It can be harder for the person to handle stress. It gets harder to control emotions. They may find that they get angry or feel very sad more easily. Over time, losing sleep can lead to depression. It can lead to weight gain and acne. It makes it easier for the person to get sick. Being tired makes it harder to remember things. It becomes harder to do well in school. It affects energy levels. This makes it harder for the person to do well in sports and other activities.

Driving safely is harder to do when a person is overtired. When tired, the time it takes to make a decision and react is much slower. 1,500 people die every year in car accidents caused by drivers ages 15-24 who are tired. The accidents may happen for two reasons. The driver falls asleep at the wheel. Or the driver doesn't brake or turn fast enough to avoid an accident.

Why Don't Teenagers Get Enough Sleep?

Teenagers are often thought of as being lazy. They want to sleep all the time. But teenagers themselves are not to blame. Their brain chemistry is telling them to stay up late. It tells them to sleep late in the mornings.



Infants often sleep 12 to 14 hours a day. They take several naps throughout the day. Toddlers sleep 10 to 12 hours a night. They may also take a 1 to 2 hour nap each day. By kindergarten, he probably no longer needs a nap. He or she should still be getting 10 hours of sleep each night. Teenagers need close to nine hours of sleep. Most adults need 7 to 8 hours of sleep.

A brain chemical tells the brain when to start feeling sleepy. This chemical works in a teenager's brain later in the evening. It works earlier for children and adults. Brooke's parents might start feeling sleepy at 8pm. But Brooke is still wide awake. In the mornings, the adults wake up with their brains

ready to go. A teenager's brain gets the same chemical "wake up" signal a couple hours later.

Busy schedules make the problem even worse.

Many teenagers also make time after school for other activities. These activities may include sports practice. They may have club meetings and volunteer work. Many students have part-time jobs. They want time with friends and family.

School schedules are often part of the problem as well. Middle and high schools often start earlier in the morning. Elementary schools start later. Students at all levels may do better if this was switched.

"It's not that simple," says school official Mike Jones. "If the elementary schools start earlier in the morning, they get out of school earlier in the afternoon. This means that many younger students would end up alone during the afternoon while their parents are at work.

"High schools would start later and finishes later in the day. There would less time in the afternoon for

sports practices and other activities. And there would be less time for the part-time jobs. Many students need to work."

How to Get Good Sleep

Teenagers may not have a lot of control over their schedules. They may not have control over what time they have to be at school each day. But there are things they can do to make sure they get good sleep.

1. Go to bed around the same time each night. Wake up around the same time each morning. You might sleep in on the weekends. But don't sleep more than two hours later than normal.
2. Don't drink beverages that have caffeine after 4pm. This includes coffee and soda. Avoid alcohol, tobacco and sleeping pills.
3. Get exercise during the day. Take time in the evening to relax.
4. Keep lights low in the evening you feel sleepy. Use bright lights in the morning to wake up.