



# CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

## How to help teens get better sleep



**By Jane Sutter**

The life of a teenager can be jam-packed with homework, sports, school clubs and jobs, not to mention a busy social life.

So what should parents do when they see their teenagers burning the candle at both ends, as the saying goes, and only sleeping for six or seven hours a night?

“Every individual needs different amounts of sleep. So on average, teenagers need 8½ to 9½ hours of sleep (at night), so a little bit more than most adults do, and most teenagers are not getting anywhere near close to that amount of sleep,” said Dr. Heidi Connolly, professor of pediatrics at University of Rochester Medical Center and chief of the Division of Sleep Medicine at Golisano Chil-

dren’s Hospital.

Dr. Shalini Paruthi, medical codirector of the St. Luke’s Sleep Medicine and Research Center in St. Louis, Mo., and 12 of her colleagues in the American Academy of Sleep Medicine reviewed 800 published articles and came to the consensus that teens need at least eight to 10 hours of sleep per night. The younger the teen, the more sleep they need, so Paruthi recommends high school freshmen and sophomores get at least nine hours.

Both doctors recognize that with teenagers’ busy lives, getting enough sleep can be difficult. “I think the most important thing is to really prioritize,” Paruthi said she tells her teen-age patients. She recommends that teens try to get as much of their homework done while at school. If they participate in sports or have other obligations after school, once those are complete, then they should focus on homework. “When people don’t get enough sleep, they don’t feel well.

### Best strategies for success at sleeping:

Dr. Heidi Connolly, professor of pediatrics at the University of Rochester Medical Center and chief of the Division of Sleep Medicine at Golisano Children’s Hospital, says these actions work best to ensure good sleep:

1. Go to bed at the same time every night and get up close to the same time every morning.
2. Get plenty of bright light exposure in the morning.
3. Get plenty of aerobic exercise, preferably outdoors.
4. Turn off electronics an hour or two before bedtime.
5. Have a calming, relaxing and consistent bedtime routine.
6. Make sure the place you are sleeping is cool, quiet and dark.

*Continued on page 2*

They feel cranky, and it's harder to do any task they are trying to do."

Besides observing if their teenager is out of sorts, having trouble concentrating in school, falling asleep while riding in a car, or wanting to take a nap after school, how can parents know if their teenager is getting enough sleep? Connolly said the first step is finding out if the teen feels well rested when their alarm clock wakes them up on a school day. Then on a weekend, if they go to bed about the same time as the weeknight and wake up on their own (without an alarm clock) at the same time in the morning, then they're getting enough sleep.

"If they're sleeping till noon (on a weekend), then that's a pretty good clue that they're not getting enough sleep, and what they're trying to do is get catch-up sleep," Connolly said. Of course, a teenager who sleeps until noon on Sunday isn't going to be falling asleep at a reasonable hour that night so they wake up tired on Monday morning. "And unfortunately what happens with that is that as the week progresses, they get progressively more and more sleep deprived," Connolly said.

### Effects of sleep deprivation

There can be major consequences to sleep deprivation for teens. Studies show that sleepy teens are more likely to get injured playing sports or get into car accidents while driving, both Connolly and Paruthi said.

"They are our youngest drivers on the road and they have the least amount of experience so when you couple that with sleep deprivation, it really can affect their driving ability and their driving skills," Paruthi said. "We want to make sure that they are getting the rest they need so that way their brain is able to function at top speeds when they are making those decisions and reactions" while driving.

Biologically (due to teenagers' circadian rhythms), it's harder for teens to fall asleep earlier in the evening so if they have to get up at 6 a.m. for school, that can be a real challenge. Connolly is in favor of getting high schools to move their start times from 7 a.m. or thereabouts to later, such as to 8 a.m., so teens can get the sleep they need. In fact, she and her colleagues worked with the Webster, N.Y., school district to start high school at a later time.

Connolly acknowledged that making a time switch can affect bus routes and

### Tips to help your teen sleep better:

1. **Encourage daily exercise and time outside.** Exercise can help your teen sleep better. Kids of all ages need to move throughout the day and get plenty of physical activity. That said, try to avoid sports practices and other types of exercise too late in the evening so there's time to unwind. Spending some time outdoors each day can also support a healthy sleep-wake cycle.

2. **Avoid overscheduling.** Having too much on their plate can make it difficult for your teen to get enough sleep. If they are running from one after-school activity to another, they won't be able to finish their homework until late at night. We all need time to relax at the end of the day to help us sleep well.

3. **Scale back screens before bedtime.** Blue light from phones, computers, tablets, TV, and even nightlights can trick the brain into thinking it's daytime. Over time, that can disrupt your teen's natural levels of melatonin, a chemical that tells us we're sleepy. Even a tiny bit of blue light coming from an electronic device can stop the release of melatonin. Encourage your teen to put all screens away at least an hour before bedtime, and charge devices outside their bedroom overnight. Having screens right there is tempting and sets kids up for staying up too late.

4. **Limit late meals and caffeine.** Aim to eat dinner a few hours before bedtime and offer whole foods that are easier to digest. Food sensitivities or substances that cause indigestion may disrupt your child's sleep because of the close relationship between the gut and the brain. It is important to remember that caffeine can stay in the body for more than eight hours, depending on a person's metabolism. Your teen should avoid caffeine after lunchtime.

5. **Make time to relax.** Engage in relaxing activities in the evening, such as a warm bath with Epsom salts, reading a book that's not on a screen, meditation, stretching, soft music, journaling or restorative yoga. Activities like these support a healthier sleep cycle.

6. **Optimize your teen's sleep environment.** Ideas include creating an inviting sleeping space with a comfortable mattress, blankets and pillows. Encourage your teen to reserve their bed for sleep and avoid doing homework and other activities there. This helps your teen's brain connect laying down in bed with sleep. If light bothers your teen put up heavy or blackout curtains or blinds. If noise outside your teen's bedroom is a problem, turn on a fan, soft music or nature sounds. Try earplugs to see if they help. Try a soothing scent like lavender. Studies have shown it can help people fall asleep faster.

7. **Consider therapy.** Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can help your teen manage stress and anxiety, nurture their gifts, and achieve a normal sleep-wake cycle. There's even a specialized form of CBT for people with insomnia called CBT-I. Digital CBT-I apps have been shown to be effective for treating insomnia in teens.

*Source: [healthychildren.org](http://healthychildren.org) operated by the American Academy of Pediatrics.*

the start times of elementary and middle schools, and have other consequences. Still, she cited studies out of Baltimore and Minneapolis that showed making the switch at a high school level didn't affect participation in after-school activities such as sports, and teens reported improvement in academic performance.

In addition, "there is clear evidence that having teenagers sleep more by moving high school start times later actually reduces frequency of car accidents with teenagers," Connolly said.

Connolly is not in favor of afternoon naps for teens. "Daytime sleeping especially for

adolescents just makes that whole problem of delayed circadian rhythm much worse."

Paruthi is more open to the idea if taking a nap doesn't interfere with the teen's ability to fall asleep at night. She said if a teen gets six hours of sleep at night plus takes a two-hour nap after school, she will take that over just getting six hours of sleep at night and no nap.

### Switch off electronics

Blue light that comes from phones, tablets, computers and TV can trick the brain into thinking that it's daytime. Data show

*Continued on page 3*





that the more time spent on screens corresponds with a decrease in success in sleeping, Connolly said. Consequently rates of insomnia are higher. "People report more difficulties with sleep when they spend a lot of time on screens, particularly right before bed time," Connolly said.

Both Connolly and Paruthi acknowledged that with teens having to do their homework using devices, it can be unrealistic to ask them to put away the device an hour or two before bedtime. A solution is for the teen to wear special glasses that block out blue light or use screen covers on electronic devices that do the same. (Using night mode on a device doesn't block the blue light.)

Paruthi recommended spending just \$15 or \$20 for a pair of glasses, as she's seen no evidence that higher priced ones work better. Anecdotally, she believes that amber-colored lenses block out the blue light better than clear ones.

### Problems with insomnia

When the pandemic kept kids at home, Connolly saw some kids struggle with insomnia, in part because of being more sedentary. Some kids gained a lot of weight due to lack of physical activity. "Exercise and light are the two strongest wake-promoting signals that come into your brain," Connolly said. "If you don't engage in enough bright

light exposure and enough exercise during the daytime, then it's harder to fall asleep. So kids who are the very, very best sleepers are the kids who get a whole lot of aerobic exercise during the day time; they spend some time outdoors in the bright sunshine, and they're not spending hours and hours playing video games or doing online activities in front of a computer."

When Connolly talks to teens who are struggling to sleep, she refrains from telling them what to do but instead offers them options of what they can do to help improve sleep. "Then they can partake of what they want, knowing that the more of these things that they choose to utilize as tools, the more successful they will be at sleeping."

Connolly said that it's important to recognize that adolescents are starting to be young adults. They need to make their own independent choices and there can be consequences to those choices. "You should not be letting a drowsy teen drive; that wouldn't be safe and parents should definitely be saying no to that."

When Paruthi and her colleagues poured over those hundreds of sleep studies, they found that teenagers who were not getting at least eight to 10 hours of sleep a night were at a higher risk of risk-taking behaviors and suicides and suicide attempts. "We were shocked to see what the impact of sleep was on these children and their mental health."

People who have underlying anxiety disorder are more likely to have insomnia, Connolly said. Treating both conditions at the same time works better than only treating one or the other. "We know that people who have depression who also have insomnia with it are much more likely to have relapses of their depression, and treating the insomnia helps prevent that and also helps to improve the depression overall."

There can also be a medical reason a child is having trouble falling asleep, Paruthi said. For example, some teens complain about restless leg syndrome or growing pains, where their legs hurt and that prevents them from sleeping. In that case, the problem could be an iron deficiency, and parents should talk to their child's pediatrician, Paruthi advised.

Connolly said that for kids who are really struggling to sleep, she and her colleagues in the Division of Sleep Medicine at Golisano Children's Hospital have a variety of resources to help. If the problem has been going on for three or four months, ignoring it and hoping it's going to get better will not work. There are additional behavioral strategies that can be tried, and most of the time, there is no need for medication, Connolly said.

*Jane Sutter is a Rochester-based freelance writer.*



# 5 FIVE WAYS

to protect your children from sexual abuse

*Parents play the primary role in educating their children about sexual abuse. Here are 5 tips for teaching safety to the little ones God has entrusted to you.*

1

**Keep it practical.** Teach your children the differences between safe touches and unsafe touches.

2

**Tell your children that saying “no” is okay.** Empower your children to say “no” if anyone makes them feel uncomfortable or touches them inappropriately.

3

**Give your children a way to alert you.** Tell your children they can use an excuse or share a special “code-word” with you to alert you about an unsafe person or situation.

4

**Tell your children to report an unsafe touch.**

Let your children know they should tell you if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe around any adult or peer. You can also identify other adults they can tell about unsafe touches.

5

**Tell your children you trust them.** If your child makes a report to you, believe him or her. Tell them it is not their fault and that you love them. Immediately bring the allegation to the attention of public authorities.



Promise to Protect

Pledge to Heal



ROMAN CATHOLIC  
DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

## Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:  
Tammy Sylvester

Diocesan Coordinator of Safe Environment Education and Compliance  
585-328-3228

Tammy.Sylvester@dor.org.

*Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.*

*To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victims' Assistance Coordinator:*

Deborah Housel  
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;  
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,  
ext. 1555  
victimsassistance@dor.org.

*All photos in this newsletter are for illustrative purposes only.*

# ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

## ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

### CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

#### Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>  
*PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.*

#### NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>  
*A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.*

## FOR PARENTS:

### Common Sense Media

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>  
*A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education*

#### Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

#### iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepsafe.org/>  
*Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies*

#### Faith and Safety:

<http://www.faithandsafety.org>  
*Safety in a digital world, a joint project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Greek Orthodox Church in America*

## LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

**Bivona Child Advocacy Center**  
(Monroe, Wayne counties):  
[www.BivonaCAC.org](http://www.BivonaCAC.org)  
585-935-7800

**Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:**  
607-737-8449  
[www.chemungcounty.com](http://www.chemungcounty.com)

**Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:**  
315-253-9795  
[www.cacofcayugacounty.org](http://www.cacofcayugacounty.org)

**Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program**  
(Ontario County):  
[www.cacfingerlakes.org](http://www.cacfingerlakes.org)  
315-548-3232

**Darkness to Light organization:**  
[www.d2l.org](http://www.d2l.org)

**STEBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:**  
[www.sthcs.org](http://www.sthcs.org)  
716-372-8532

**NYS State Central Registry**  
(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):  
1-800-342-3720

**NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)**  
866-313-3013

**Tompkins County Advocacy Center:**  
[www.theadvocacycenter.org](http://www.theadvocacycenter.org)  
607-277-3203

**Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:**  
585-786-8846

**Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:**  
315-531-3417, Ext. 6