

Sleep Problems and Bedtime Issues

Children of all ages can have sleep problems. For infants, it can be difficult to establish a good sleep routine. Toddlers and preschoolers may resist going to bed at night. Teens may have different types of sleep problems. Feeling sleepy during the day is a common sign of sleep problems; behavior problems may also occur. Ask your doctor if you have questions or concerns about your child's sleep and bedtime habits.

How much sleep does my child need?

The amount and patterns of sleep vary by age. At all ages, it is normal to wake up briefly during the night, followed by going back to sleep. Although every child is different, the following sleep patterns are typical:

- Newborns sleep up to 16 or 20 hours per day for the first few months. The pattern varies a lot but is generally 1 to 4 hours of sleep followed by 1 to 2 hours of awake time. Most babies settle into a nightly sleep routine by 2 to 3 months.
- Sleep needs slowly decrease with time. By 9 months, most babies are sleeping through the night, plus 2 to 4 hours of nap time per day. Naps usually end by age 5.
- School-aged children sleep 10 hours per night. They may “catch up” on sleep over the weekend. Teenagers should sleep 9 hours per night but often sleep less.

What is a good bedtime routine?

You can develop some regular bedtime routines that will help your child develop healthy sleep habits.

- Share some quiet time with your child in the hour before bedtime. Choose quiet activities like reading or listening to soft music—not rough play, watching TV, or playing video games. Keep the TV out of your child's bedroom.
- A light snack before bed is OK, but avoid heavy meals or caffeine (including cola drinks or hot chocolate).
- Your child's room should be quiet and dark. (A dim nightlight is OK for children who are scared of the dark.) Keep the temperature cool but not cold.
- Make sure your child gets some exercise/outside time during the day. Don't use your child's room for punishment or “time-outs.”

- Keep bedtime and wake-up times consistent; too much difference between the two on the weekends can cause problems.

What kinds of sleep problems occur and how are they treated?

Almost all the time, the proper treatment for sleep problems in infants and children is a change in bedtime routines and behaviors.

Medications are rarely used for sleep problems in children (and are probably used more often than they should be in teens or adults).

- Not getting enough sleep, at any age and for whatever reason, can make your child tired during the day. This may lead to fussiness or crying in infants. In older children, it can lead to poor school performance or falling asleep during the day.
- Children who do not get enough sleep can have behavior problems, including lack of attention and hyperactivity. They may act just like a child with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- Every child with daytime sleepiness should be checked for possible sleep-related breathing disorders, such as obstructive sleep apnea (OSA). Loud or persistent snoring is the main symptom of OSA.

Other common sleep problems vary with age:

- *Infants and toddlers.* Some babies and toddlers develop a habit of falling asleep only under certain conditions, such as when being rocked or fed. They may resist going to sleep unless you're there. If they wake up briefly during the night, as is normal, they are unable to go back to sleep without crying or going to their parents' room. This can lead to not enough sleep for both children and parents.
- If your baby can't or won't go to sleep without a parent there, the best approach is to gradually reduce the amount of time you're present and the routines you've developed (for example, rocking).
- For younger infants, let your baby cry for a little bit longer each night. For example, the first night, wait 5 minutes before checking the first time; 10 minutes before the second check; and 15 minutes before every check after that. When you check, talk or sing to your baby a little and pat him or her on the back. Try not to pick up or rock the baby; the goal is let your infant soothe himself or herself back to sleep.
- This approach takes some willpower. For the first few nights, your baby may cry more than ever! Try not to

give in; if you pick up your baby to rock or feed him or her, you may have to start the process all over again.

- Toddlers can take a stuffed animal or other toy to bed. Reward your child for staying in bed, for example, with praise or stickers.
- *Preschoolers and older children.* Some children have difficulty falling asleep. They may resist going to bed or keep getting up after they go to bed. This behavior is sometimes called “curtain calls”—your child keeps asking for “one more glass of water” or “one more story.” The most common cause is a lack of consistent limits and a regular bedtime routine. Several steps may be helpful:
 - Establish a regular bedtime routine, as outlined earlier. Set a schedule and stick to it.
 - Don’t pay attention if your child stalls or tries to delay bedtime. Don’t get mad or yell. Instead, try giving positive rewards for appropriate behavior, for example, praise your child when he or she goes to bed on time without getting up.
 - For older children, learning some simple relaxation techniques may help them calm down and fall asleep.
 - Talk to your doctor if these measures aren’t successful in promoting change in your child’s sleep habits.
- *Teenagers.* Teens need as much sleep as younger children but often get less. Many teens sleep only 7 hours

rather than the 9 hours they need. Part of the reason is that teens stay up later, especially on the weekends when they sleep later in the morning. Teens may also have *insomnia*: sleeplessness is often related to anxiety. This can result in daytime sleepiness, leading to problems at school and in other areas of life.

- Talk to your doctor to determine the reasons for sleep problems and to decide on proper treatment for your child.
- Many other types of sleep problems are possible, including:
 - Nightmares and night terrors
 - Narcolepsy (difficulty staying awake during the daytime)
 - Restless legs syndrome (a problem where the person cannot lie still)



When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- You need help in dealing with your child’s sleep and bedtime problems.
- You’ve made a good effort at changing your child’s bedtime routine, but sleep problems continue or get worse.