

"To sleep, perchance to dream." It would seem the immortal bard pondered the difficulties of sleep. We spend over a third of life in sleep, yet it remains a mystery as to its function and effect on health. All mammals need sleep. Theories suggest that sleep allows the brain to regenerate neurochemicals and consolidate the day's short term memories into long term memories. Doctors recognize that lack of sleep is associated with depression, autonomic nervous system dysfunction, weakened immune system, irritability and poor learning and judgment. Lack of sleep is associated with 25% of fatal auto accidents and in animal studies inability to sleep leads to an unexplained sudden death.

Sleep can be an issue throughout life. As infants we sleep 16-20 hours per day. This number gets progressively lower until as adolescents, we need a minimum of 9 hours sleep per day. While most parents think their kids get enough sleep, on average teens only get about 7 hours of sleep per night. This 2 hour sleep deficit exacerbates issues in the teen years such as depression, poor decision making, increased risk of auto accidents, and learning and memory issues. Adolescents differ from their parents in that they are naturally "night owls." Teens have a delay in secretion of melatonin compared to other age groups and as such do not become drowsy until later. Couple this with the need to be at school by 7:50 am they have little time to get 9 hours of sleep.

Following are a few suggestions to aid teens in getting enough sleep. First they should have a set bedtime. Next all electronics should be turned off 1 hour before sleep. Furthermore, regular after school exercise will help bring on drowsiness later in the evening. Students should avoid caffeine after noon, as caffeine can remain in the system for 10-16 hours. Sleep location should be dark and consistent. Finally, school systems should consider starting classes for older kids at 9 am. Schools that have done this have shown an increase in grades, decrease in tardiness, and a decrease in auto accidents by the students. The health benefits are many and so we should all make every effort "to sleep per chance to dream".