**Teens and Sleep (National Sleep Foundation)**

Sleep is food for the brain. During sleep, important body functions and brain activity occur. Skipping sleep can be harmful — even deadly, particularly if you are behind the wheel. You can look bad, you may feel moody, and you perform poorly. Sleepiness can make it hard to get along with your family and friends and hurt your scores on school exams, on the court or on the field. Remember: A brain that is hungry for sleep will get it, even when you don’t expect it. For example, drowsiness and falling asleep at the wheel cause more than 100,000 car crashes every year. When you do not get enough sleep, you are more likely to have an accident, injury and/or illness.

**How Much Sleep Do You Need?**

**FACTS:**

* Sleep is vital to your well-being, as important as the air you breathe, the water you drink and the food you eat. It can even help you to eat better and manage the stress of being a teen.
* Biological sleep patterns shift toward later times for both sleeping and waking during adolescence -- meaning it is natural to not be able to fall asleep before 11:00 pm.
* Teens need about 8 to 10 hours of sleep each night to function best. Most teens do not get enough sleep — one study found that only 15% reported sleeping 8 1/2 hours on school nights.
* Teens tend to have irregular sleep patterns across the week — they typically stay up late and sleep in late on the weekends, which can affect their biological clocks and hurt the quality of their sleep.
* Many teens suffer from treatable sleep disorders, such as [narcolepsy](http://www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-disorders-problems/excessive-daytime-sleepiness-disorders/narcolepsy), insomnia, [restless legs syndrome](http://www.sleepfoundation.org/content/restless-legs-syndrome-rls-and-sleep) or sleep apnea.

**CONSEQUENCES:**

Not getting enough sleep or having sleep difficulties can:

* Limit your ability to learn, listen, concentrate and solve problems. You may even forget important information like names, numbers, your homework or a date with a special person in your life;
* Make you more prone to pimples. Lack of sleep can contribute to acne and other skin problems;
* Lead to aggressive or inappropriate behavior such as yelling at your friends or being impatient with your teachers or family members;
* Cause you to eat too much or eat unhealthy foods like sweets and fried foods that lead to weight gain;
* Heighten the effects of alcohol and possibly increase use of caffeine and nicotine; and
* Contribute to illness, not using equipment safely or [driving drowsy](http://www.drowsydriving.org/).

**SOLUTIONS:**

* Make sleep a priority. Review Teen Time in this toolkit and keep a [sleep diary](http://www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-diary/SleepDiaryv6.pdf). Decide what you need to change to get enough sleep to stay healthy, happy, and smart!
* Naps can help pick you up and make you work more efficiently, if you plan them right. Naps that are too long or too close to bedtime can interfere with your regular sleep.
* Make your room a sleep haven. Keep it cool, quiet and dark. If you need to, get eyeshades or blackout curtains. Let in bright light in the morning to signal your body to wake up.
* No pills, vitamins or drinks can replace good sleep. Consuming caffeine close to bedtime can hurt your sleep, so avoid coffee, tea, soda/pop and chocolate late in the day so you can get to sleep at night. Nicotine and alcohol will also interfere with your sleep.
* When you are sleep deprived, you are as impaired as driving with a blood alcohol content of .08%, which is illegal for drivers in many states. Drowsy driving causes over 100,000 crashes each year. Recognize sleep deprivation and call someone else for a ride. Only sleep can save you!
* Establish a bed and wake-time and stick to it, coming as close as you can on the weekends. A consistent sleep schedule will help you feel less tired since it allows your body to get in sync with its natural patterns. You will find that it’s easier to fall asleep at bedtime with this type of routine.
* Don’t eat, drink, or exercise within a few hours of your bedtime. Don’t leave your homework for the last minute. Try to avoid the TV, computer and telephone in the hour before you go to bed. Stick to quiet, calm activities, and you’ll fall asleep much more easily!
* If you do the same things every night before you go to sleep, you teach your body the signals that it’s time for bed. Try taking a bath or shower (this will leave you extra time in the morning), or reading a book.
* Try keeping a diary or to-do lists. If you jot notes down before you go to sleep, you’ll be less likely to stay awake worrying or stressing.
* When you hear your friends talking about their all-nighters, tell them how good you feel after getting enough sleep.
* Most teens experience changes in their sleep schedules. Their internal body clocks can cause them to fall asleep and wake up later. You can’t change this, but you can participate in interactive activities and classes to help counteract your sleepiness. Make sure your activities at night are calming to counteract your already heightened alertness.

If teens need 8 to 10 hours of sleep to do their best and naturally go to sleep around 11:00 pm, one way to get more sleep is to start school later.

Teens' natural sleep cycle puts them in conflict with school start times. Most high school students need an alarm clock or a parent to wake them on school days. They are like zombies getting ready for school and find it hard to be alert and pay attention in class. Because they are sleep deprived, they are sleepy all day and cannot do their best.

Schools that have set later bell times find that students do not go to bed later, but get one hour more of sleep per school night, which means five hours more per week.

Enrollment and attendance improves and students are more likely to be on time when school starts. Parents and teachers report that teens are more alert in the morning and in better moods; they are less likely to feel depressed or need to visit the nurse or school counselor.

**POLL DATA:**

While everyone is accustomed to having a bad morning here and there – feeling irritable, unhappy or even sad, NSF's 2006 *Sleep in America* poll found that many adolescents exhibit symptoms of a depressive mood on a frequent if not daily basis, and these teens are more likely to have sleep problems.

The NSF poll calculated depressive mood scores for each of the 1,602 poll respondents by measuring adolescents' responses to four mood states (using a scale of "1" to "3" where 1 equals "not at all" and 3 equals "much"):

* Felt unhappy, sad or depressed;
* Felt hopeless about the future;
* Felt nervous or tense; and
* Worried too much about things.

The results showed that about half (46%) of the adolescents surveyed had a depressive mood score of 10 to 14, 37% had a score of 15 to 19, and 17% had a score of 20 to 30; these scores are considered low, moderate and high respectively.

Most notably, those adolescents with high scores ranging from 20 to 30 were more likely than those with lower scores to take longer to fall asleep on school nights, get an insufficient amount of sleep and have sleep problems related to sleepiness. In fact, 73% of those adolescents who report feeling unhappy, sad, or depressed also report not getting enough sleep at night and being excessively sleepy during the day.

While many adults may think that adolescents have things easy or don't have much to worry about – the opposite seems true according to the NSF poll. Most adolescents were likely to say they worried about things too much (58%) and/or felt stressed out/anxious (56%). Many of the adolescents surveyed also reported feeling hopeless about the future, or feeling unhappy, sad or depressed much or somewhat within the past two weeks of surveying.

Research shows that lack of sleep affects mood, and a depressed mood can lead to lack of sleep. To combat this vicious cycle, sleep experts recommend that teens prioritize sleep and focus on healthy sleep habits. Teens can start by getting the 8 to 10 hours of sleep they need each night, keeping consistent sleep and wake schedules on school nights and weekends, and opting for relaxing activities such as reading or taking a warm shower or bath before bed instead of turning on the TV or computer.

"If parents and teens know what good sleep entails and the benefits of making and sticking to a plan that supports good sleep, then they might re-examine their choices about what truly are their ‘essential’ activities," says Mary Carskadon, Ph.D., Director of Chronobiology/Sleep Research at the E.P. Bradley Hospital and Professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at Brown Medical School in Providence, R.I. "The earlier parents can start helping their children with good sleep habits, the easier it will be to sustain them through the teen years."

**Sleep Schedules for Kids**

Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise," said Ben Franklin. But does this adage apply to [teens](http://www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-topics/teens-and-sleep)? Research in the 1990s found that later sleep and wake patterns among adolescents are biologically determined; the natural tendency for teenagers is to stay up late at night and wake up later in the morning. This research indicates that school bells that ring as early as 7:00 a.m. in many parts of the country stand in stark contrast with adolescents' sleep patterns and needs.

Evidence suggests that teenagers are indeed seriously sleep deprived. A recent poll conducted by the National Sleep Foundation found that 60% of children under the age of 18 complained of being tired during the day, according to their parents, and 15% said they fell asleep at school during the year.

On April 2 of 1999, Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), introduced a congressional resolution to encourage schools and school districts to reconsider early morning start times to be more in sync with teens' biological makeup. House Congressional Resolution 135 or the "ZZZ's to A’s" Act would encourage individual schools and school districts all over the country to move school start times to no earlier than 8:30 a.m.

"I hope this is a wake up call to school districts and parents all over this country," said Lofgren. "With early school start times, some before 7:00 a.m., adolescents are not getting enough sleep.

"Over time, sleep deprivation leads to serious consequences for academic achievement, social behavior, and the health and safety of our nation's youth," the Congresswoman added. "We must encourage schools to push back their start times to at least 8:30 a.m. — a schedule more in tune with adolescents' biological sleep and wake patterns and more closely resembling the adult work day."

Lofgren's work has continued. In 2014, The National Sleep Foundation (NSF) worked with U.S. Representative Zoe Lofgren to introduce [legislation](https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/114/hr1306)that addresses the relationship between school start times and adolescent health, wellbeing and performance. We encourage you to contact your Representatives and urge them to support this bill.

**POLL DATA:**

In fact, public opinion seems to side with Lofgren's "Zzz's to A's" resolution. According to the National Sleep Foundation's 2002 *Sleep in America* poll, 80% of respondents said high schools should start no earlier than 8:00 a.m. each day; nearly one-half of these respondents (47%) said start times should be between 8:00 and 8:30 a.m. Only 17% of those polled said high school classes should begin before 8:00 a.m.

**EFFECTS:**

A study by Dr. Kyla Wahlstrom at the University of Minnesota, demonstrates the impact of pushing back school start times. After the Minneapolis Public School District changed the starting times of seven high schools from 7:15 a.m. to 8:40 a.m., Dr. Wahlstrom investigated the impact of later start times on student performance, and the results are encouraging. Dr. Wahlstrom found that students benefited by obtaining five or more extra hours of sleep per week.

She also found improvement in attendance and enrollment rates, increased daytime alertness, and decreased student-reported [depression](http://www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-topics/depression-and-sleep). Many experts agree that adolescents require 8 to 10 hours of sleep each night, however, few actually get that much sleep.

Even with compelling research, changing school start times can be challenging for school districts. Administrators have to delay busing schedules. Coaches worry about scheduling practices and many parents rely on the current start times for reasons such as childcare or carpools.

Students are concerned that being in school later in the day means that it will cut into after-school jobs and other extracurricular activities. Still, there are convincing reasons to push back school start times. Mary Carskadon, PhD, a renowned expert on adolescent sleep, cites several advantages for teens to get the sleep they need:

* less likelihood of experiencing depressed moods;
* reduced likelihood for tardiness;
* reduced absenteeism;
* better grades;
* reduced risk of [drowsy driving](http://www.drowsydriving.org/); and
* reduced risk of metabolic and nutritional deficits associated with insufficient sleep, including obesity.

Dr. Carskadon is Director of the Chronobiology/Sleep Research Laboratory at Bradley Hospital in East Providence, R.I., and Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at the Brown University School of Medicine. She is a member of NSF's Sleep and Teens Task Force. With the resumption of school classes in the fall, start times are likely to remain a hot topic. Thus far, individual schools or districts in 19 states have pushed back their start times, and more than 100 school districts in an additional 17 states are considering delaying their start times.

"Changing school start times is not the only step needed," says Dr. Carskadon. She also advocates reducing weekend sleep lag (staying up later). "It's important to add sleep to the school curriculum at all grade levels and make sleep a positive priority."

**ADVOCACY:**

Advocating for Sleep Friendly Schools can seem like a challenging task; however, here you will find tips, guides sample materials and case studies to support your efforts and help you conduct your advocacy campaign. Sleep is so important to all of us, and for teens it seems nearly impossible to get enough. So don't sleep on it; start today to help create sleep-friendly schools that promote healthy, safe and productive students!

# Eight Major Obstacles to Delaying School Start Times

[Home](https://sleepfoundation.org/) >> [Sleep News](https://sleepfoundation.org/sleep-news) >> Eight Major Obstacles to Delaying School Start Times

The following are eight major obstacles to changing [school start times](http://www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-topics/school-start-time-and-sleep):

## 1. Transportation

Because most school districts have a delicately balanced bus transportation system designed to run as efficiently and inexpensively as possible, any change in the school schedule can have a severe impact. The specific circumstances in each district vary, but problems that arise can include cost, recruiting drivers, and/or redesigning the routes.

One solution that has worked to solve this problem is flipping start times, most commonly elementary with high school. This solution requires no extra buses or drivers, just a change in the order of pickups. This schedule also seems to be more appropriate to elementary school students’ sleep schedules, because young [children](http://www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-topics/children-and-sleep) tend to wake up earlier in the morning. This is a very dicey issue; however, in districts where the start time is quite early. If the young students have to go to school so early, they have to go to bed VERY early (because they need 10 - 11 hours of sleep). Parents may not get home from work until very near or after bedtime. The direct flip cannot work unless all start times are reasonable.

Another solution that may be implemented is a shift to public transportation for older students. In many cases, the public bus routes are similar to yellow bus routes, and can be used by students. Many districts have found they can actually save money by buying students bus passes and eliminating a large portion of their yellow bus fleet.

Some communities face another problem, which is that shifting start times will impact traffic congestion and commuting for both teachers and students. Teen drivers are at the highest risk for [drowsy driving](http://www.drowsydriving.org/); however, and preliminary studies have shown that delaying their school start time has a significant effect in lowering the occurrence of such crashes.

## 2. After School Activities

High school athletics are very important to many students who have obvious concerns about the impact of a change in start times on their ability to participate. Any delay in the start of school will most likely result in a later release time, which may reduce time available for practice and matches (especially daylight hours). One result of later release times may be greater competition for field and gym space, which may result in the cancellation of some programs (JV and sports like swimming and golf, for example, which often require the use of facilities during off-peak hours). If school gets out later, some athletes might be required to leave class early in order to attend a match. In this case, students may have to choose between a game and a test, a choice no student should have to make.

Despite all these concerns, most districts that have changed their start time have experienced few problems with regard to athletics. Practice times are rescheduled, and in some cases lights are installed so practice can run a little later. Match times are changed so that students do not have to leave class early. Many districts have even seen increased participation in sports (Edina, MN) and improved performance by their teams (Wilton, CT; Nathan Hale, Seattle, WA). Research has shown that sleep deprivation has a severe negative impact on coordination and endurance, so it makes sense that better rested student athletes would perform better.

Also, while athletics are obviously very important to many students and their families, everyone must remember that a school’s first obligation is to provide its students with an environment conducive to learning.

The delay in release time for students also means that students with after-school jobs may be affected. This issue is important for certain students and their families who rely on the extra income to get by. Therefore, the change may disproportionately affect low income families. On the other hand, studies have shown that employers indicate a change in start times has not affected their business or the number of hours their student employees can work. They indicate that extra help is not usually needed until school gets out anyway, so they can easily adjust to the new schedule.

Other researchers have found that students who are employed for more than 15 hours per week are negatively impacted academically, so working fewer hours may be better for students who don’t rely on the income for substantive needs, which includes the great majority of working teens.

Participation in other activities such as after-school tutorials, religious classes, community service, or clubs may also be jeopardized by a later release time. On the other hand, many students find that if they sleep more, they can finish their homework faster and have ample time to participate in extracurricular activities.

## 3. Other Students and Programs

As mentioned above, a change in schedule for high school students will usually result in a change for younger students. If elementary students have the earliest start times, they may be waiting for the bus in the dark early mornings, or waiting at home alone after school. Research is lacking on the effect of school start times on younger students, so it is hard to justify their earlier start.

Many communities have been able to find workable solutions for younger children. Local community organizations may be able to provide childcare. Parents can organize a rotating schedule for a “bus stop supervisor” each day for each neighborhood.

A change in transportation can be difficult for certain student populations and programs, such as special education students and career centers. Careful planning and consideration can usually resolve such difficulties.

## 4. Reduced Time to Access Public Resources

If school ends later, students will have less time to use the library, among many other community resources. However, students do seem to be able to work more efficiently when they are less sleep deprived, and could therefore make better use of the time they do have.

## 5. Teachers

Some worry that a later start time and release time will leave teachers less time with their families. But in practice, teachers rarely find this to be true. Many are able to spend more time with young students in the morning. Some elect to arrive at school at the same time and complete planning before school, meaning their schedules are unchanged. Many teachers also report having extra personal time to exercise.

Teachers can also take advantage of the extra time to sleep. This will enable them to be more alert and energetic in the classroom and more effectively handle problems and discipline procedures. Teachers also appreciate being able to incorporate the day’s news into their lessons.

Teachers who coach have seen very little impact on their role as coaches. The changes implemented to help students adjust to the new schedule also apply to the teachers who work as coaches.

## 6. Stress for Families

Many people are resistant to change and emotions can run high when someone is forced to alter his/her routine. Most families have a highly coordinated schedule worked out to balance the many activities of each of its members. The thought of reworking this delicate balance can be intimidating. Many parents have a hard time looking beyond this personal disadvantage to the benefits that will result.

In reality, a community can easily adjust to change, especially if given ample time and resources to prepare. A detailed outline of the expected changes is essential. Hotlines, message boards and meetings to discuss problems are helpful resources. It is also important to involve stakeholders in the process from the beginning, so they can voice their concerns.

## 7. Uneducated Community

One of the biggest challenges in any campaign for change is to educate the community and convince them of the merits of your proposal. It is extremely important to spread the word to as many people as possible about sleep and school start times. The change will affect the entire community, from students and parents to businesses, libraries, police, youth sports clubs, bus drivers and many others. Create a standard presentation, and offer to give it to as many groups as possible. People must understand the biological changes that occur in teens that make them unable to fall asleep early. This means that the issue cannot just be a personal matter of putting the kids to bed earlier, or a sign that teens are lazy, obstinate or defiant, but a serious issue that must be addressed by the schools.

Your education efforts should also inform adults of their probable sleep deprivation and its effects. Sleep is important for everyone, not just the students.

## 8. Resistance of students

Students may not be clamoring for this change. Teens, much like the adults in their lives, will be resistant to change and will worry about the impact on their after-school activities.

Therefore, it is equally important to educate the students themselves about the benefits of a later start time. This material can be incorporated in many different subjects at all age levels. Science class is the most obvious, but sleep can also be discussed in psychology, health, math (data on sleep can be used to learn about different mathematical operations), social studies, geography, and English classes (students can write persuasive essays or research papers on this issue).