



# Sleep Health in tweens & teens



**The Woolcock Institute of Medical Research  
is a not-for-profit organisation**

If you are interested in further information about becoming involved in our research studies or making a donation, please visit our website [www.woolcock.org.au](http://www.woolcock.org.au).

Your contribution will make a difference.

Thank you for your support.


**P** 02 9805 3000  
**F** 02 9805 3199  
**E** [info@woolcock.org.au](mailto:info@woolcock.org.au)

[www.woolcock.org.au](http://www.woolcock.org.au)

**WOOLCOCK**   
LEADERS IN BREATHING & SLEEP RESEARCH



**1** Only use your bed for sleep. Don't lie on your bed outside sleep times



**2** Try to go to bed and get up at about the same time every day



**3** Don't consume caffeinated drinks after 2pm



**4** Eat at least two hours before bed



**5** Have a relaxing pre-bed routine. Clear your thoughts, meditate




**6** Take a hot bath or shower (more than 20 minutes before bedtime)



**7** Try drinking a milky drink or chamomile tea before bed



**8** Make your bedroom a quiet place



**9** Make sure your bedroom is not too hot



**10** Turn your computer off. Leave your phone out of the bedroom

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SLEEP

Sleep, nutrition and exercise are the three pillars of good health in adolescence. When these are optimal, teenagers are protected from multiple physical and mental health problems. Resilient and good quality sleep are important protectors against mood and learning problems that typically amplify in the face of acute stress and worsen through high school years.

Despite 70 percent of our teenagers being sleep deprived, this problem goes largely unrecognised, and therefore uncorrected. Parents, educators and doctors all have important roles in creating good sleep health.

Most sleepy teens never see a doctor for medical treatment. Some are mislabelled as depressed or anxious and are seen by psychologists, who often neglect to treat the underlying sleep problem.

### PARENTS: WHAT CAN YOU DO?

As a parent, don't think that because your teen is in the bedroom at night they are sleeping as this is not always so. Many teen bedrooms are social hubs rather than sleep zones. Suspect a sleep problem if you see chronic grumpiness, anxiety, low moods or academic underperformance. Check with teachers for evidence of classroom inattention, poor engagement, distractibility. Most importantly, look out for the two "red flags" for poor sleep. These are big weekend sleep-ins and/or great difficulty in waking up and getting moving on school mornings. If you're still not sure if sleep is a problem, have a look at SleepShack for further information.

If you detect a sleep problem, move to fix it. Many parents feel totally disempowered to move forward, perhaps fearing conflict or restricting their teens independence. Be proactive. Act in your teen's best interest, rather than being their best friend. Teens are highly unlikely to improve their sleep spontaneously and almost all need your help.



## SEVEN STEPS TO IMPROVE TEEN SLEEP

Below is a seven-step solution pathway for parents of tired teens. Progress slowly if need be. If met with brick walls, ask your son or daughter to choose just one of the strategies as a starting point. Remember that change is difficult and often slow.

### 1 Sit down and have a sleep chat

Express your concerns openly and ask your teen what they think. Many teens normalise chronic tiredness, as it is so common. Try and engender some insight, and hopefully motivation to improve sleep will follow. Try to figure out what particular benefit of good sleep could be a key motivator (e.g. better at sport, less stressed, better learning, etc).

### 2 Make a lights out agreement

Broker a reasonable school night bedtime and stick to it. Help achieve this by helping organise the timing of evening activities. Teens, especially boys, are often poor evening organisers and this risks bedtime delays. Agree that bedtime is also lights out time.

### 3 Avoid reverse/conditioned arousal

Use the bed only for sleep. Do not lie on the bed outside sleep times.

### 4 Establish a pre-bed routine

Also known as "winding down". Have a relaxing 45-minute routine in the lead up to lights out. No

screens. No school work. Nothing exciting. Do the components at the same time, in the same order, each night. This slowly trains the brain that "sleep is coming soon". Taking a bath (or shower), relaxed reading, chilled music, a snack and drink, and yoga are all fine.

### 5 Limit overnight screen time

Ideally all devices should be away from the bedroom at night and charging elsewhere. This is usually the least popular strategy with teens and you are likely to get pushback. If still problematic, mention the possibility of enforcing screen limits by acquiring an electronic limiter (Family Zone or similar).

### 6 Avoid sleep-ins

As much as possible, minimise big weekend sleep-ins.

### 7 Other digital device strategies

In the evenings, school work should be completed before social screen activity starts. Multi-tasking doesn't work. Although the teen bedroom has become the hub for digital device use, on school evenings devices should be used in a common area of the house, such as the living room

Be a good digital role model. As a family, have a digital Sabbath every so often on a weekend day. This demonstrates that FOMO can be overcome and healthy family activities without screens can be fun!

### WHAT THEN?

If you are not winning at any stage, seek professional help for your tired teen. Alternatively, sign up at SleepShack ([www.sleepshack.com.au](http://www.sleepshack.com.au)).

Whatever you do, don't do nothing. Left untreated, sleep deprivation gets worse through adolescence and may lead to significant mental health problems. Treatment success is higher in younger adolescence, so consult a paediatric sleep specialist early.

To find out more, go to [www.woolcock.org.au/clinic](http://www.woolcock.org.au/clinic).