

7 Sleep-Smart Tips

1. Sleep is food for the brain: Get enough of it, and get it when you need it. Even mild sleepiness can hurt your performance—from taking school exams to playing sports or video games. Lack of sleep can make you look tired and feel depressed, irritable, and angry.

2. Keep consistency in mind: Establish a regular bedtime and waketime schedule, and maintain it during weekends and school (or work) vacations. Don't stray from your schedule frequently, and never do so for two or more consecutive nights. If you must go off schedule, avoid delaying your bedtime by more than one hour, awaken the next day within two hours of your regular schedule, and, if you are sleepy during the day, take an early afternoon nap.

3. Learn how much sleep you need to function at your best. You should awaken refreshed, not tired. Most adolescents need between 8.5 and 9.25 hours of sleep each night. Know when you need to get up in the morning, then calculate when you need to go to sleep to get at least 8.5 hours of sleep a night.

4. Get into bright light as soon as possible in the morning, but avoid it in the evening. The light helps to signal to the brain when it should wakeup and when it should prepare to sleep.

5. Understand your circadian rhythm. Then, you can try to maximize your schedule throughout the day according to your internal clock. For example, to compensate for your “slump (sleepy) times,” participate in stimulating activities or classes that are interactive, and avoid lecture classes or potentially unsafe activities, including driving.

6. After lunch (or after noon), stay away from coffee, colas with caffeine, and nicotine, which are all stimulants. Also avoid alcohol, which disrupts sleep.

7. Relax before going to bed. Avoid heavy reading, studying, and computer games within one hour of going to bed. Don't fall asleep with the television on—flickering light and stimulating content can inhibit restful sleep. If you work during the week, try to avoid working night hours. If you work until 9:30 pm, for example, you will need to plan time to “chill out” before going to sleep.