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Teens hardwired to sleep longer

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Memo: Ran with fact box "Tips for Teen Sleepers", which has been appended to this story.

If your teenager is a real night owl, the kind who likes to hit the snooze button on school days and sleep in on the weekends, Dr. Edward O'Malley has a diagnosis:

"That's a completely normal teen," says O'Malley, director of the Sleep Disorders Center at Norwalk Hospital in Norwalk, Conn.

"Teenagers," he explains, "are hard-wired to have a different sleep cycle than adults (or younger children). It's a biological reality that they want to go to bed later and sleep later." What's not normal, says O'Malley, is expecting the typical teen to get up at the first light of day, head off to school and function at peak levels on the road and in class.

Especially when research suggests adolescents need a minimum of 9.25 hours of sleep a night.

One reason teens are not getting that kind of quality shut-eye is the early start of the school day, O'Malley says.

For O'Malley and other sleep experts, getting school districts to consider changing their start times has become something of a mission.

"Parents sort of accept that kids have to keep these crazy schedules to succeed," says Dr. Saul Rothenberg, who is affiliated with Greenwich Hospital's Sleep Center in Greenwich, Conn. "For a lot of kids and their families, there is no room in their long list of priorities for sleep. Instead, it's 'I have to go to ballet. I have to go to soccer. I have six or seven hours of homework.' Parents tolerate it because they think that kind of pressure is normal and they almost expect it."

Rothenberg says parents need to ask some tough questions of their teens -- and themselves -- if kids are coming up on the short end of a good night's sleep. Take note of whether you have "to pry them out of bed in the morning," he says.

"If a kid is staying up past midnight to do his homework, something's got to give," Rothenberg says. "And the first place I would start to look is at after-school activities."

O'Malley notes that national statistics show that most teenage car wrecks don't happen at night but between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m., "when they are going to school."

A 30- to 40-minute delay in school opening wouldn't be terribly disruptive to educators, but O'Malley says letting a teen sleep an extra 45 minutes a day means an extra 2 1/2 hours a week of sleep and that could make a big difference for a teenager.

TIPS FOR TEEN SLEEPERS

- Take a hard look at after-school activities. Many kids are overscheduled with lessons, sports or other activities.
- If excessive homework is keeping students up past 11 p.m., parents may need to request some course load alterations .
- Allow some, but not a lot, of time for "catch up" sleep on the weekends. Teens who sleep very late on Saturday and Sunday may struggle to fall asleep Sunday night, notes Dr. Saul Rothenberg.
- Limit computer, cellphone and television use in the bedroom. No later than 11 p.m. is ideal.
- Monitor caffeine use. Caffeine can interfere with natural sleep cycles, and many teens are drinking way too much coffee.

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