

Start school later in the morning, say sleepy teens

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A survey of sleep-deprived teens finds they think that a later start time for school and tests given later in the school day would result in better grades. The survey was presented at the American Thoracic Society 2007 International Conference, on Sunday, May 20.

The survey of 280 high school students confirmed what most parents with a teenager know: they are not getting enough sleep. More sleep would translate into improved academic performance, according to the teens questioned. They all attended Harriton High School in suburban Philadelphia, where the school day begins at 7:30 a.m. and ends at 2:25 p.m.

The survey found that:

- 78% of students said it was difficult to get up in the morning
- Only 16% said they regularly had enough sleep
- 70% thought their grades would improve if they had more sleep
- 90% thought their academic performance would improve if school were to start later

The surveyed teens said they do not feel alert while taking tests during early morning periods, and they do not think they can perform at the pinnacle of their ability during the early morning hours. Most students said they thought the best time to take a test would be from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. They thought they would perform better academically and that their grades would improve if they could sleep longer.

Richard Schwab, M.D., of the University of Pennsylvania, conducted the study with his daughter Amanda, one of the sleep-deprived teens who attended Harrington High School. “I watched her get up early for four years, and saw how difficult it was,” Dr. Schwab says. “Teenagers need more sleep than adults and their circadian rhythms are phase shifted so that their ideal bedtime is midnight to 1:00 a.m.; yet they have to get up at 6:30 or earlier for high school.

While adults usually need 7 to 8 hours of sleep, teens need 8 to 9 hours, he says. In addition, teens go to bed much later – their biological clock often keeps them up until 1 a.m. to 2 a.m. Because they have to get up so early for school, many teens achieve only 6 ½ to 7 hours of sleep or, in some cases, much less. That means they tend to sleep in on the weekends, often until 11 am or later, to try to make up for their sleep deficit.

“Right now, high schools usually start earlier in the morning than elementary schools. But if school start times were based on sleep cycles, elementary schools should start at 7:30 and high schools at 8:30 or 8:45 – right now it’s the reverse. School systems should be thinking about changing their start times. It would not be easy—they would have to change the busing system—but it would increase their student's sleep time and likely improve their school performance.”

Source: American Thoracic Society

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