

# Nix the all-nighter: A good night's sleep is key to doing well on exams

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As fall semesters wind down at the country's colleges and universities, students will be pulling all-night study sessions to prepare for final exams. Ironically, the loss of sleep during these all-nighters could actually work against them performing well, says a Harris Health System sleep specialist.

Dr. Philip Alapat, medical director, Harris Health Sleep Disorders Center, and assistant professor, Baylor College of Medicine, recommends students instead study throughout the semester, set up study sessions in the evening (the optimal time of alertness and concentration) and get at least 8 hours of sleep the night before exams.

"[Memory recall](#) and ability to maintain concentration are much improved when an individual is rested," he says. "By preparing early and being able to better recall what you have studied, your ability to perform well on exams is increased."

As head of the Harris Health Sleep Disorders Center, a nationally certified facility by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, Alapat and his staff perform about 1,200 sleep studies a year to evaluate patients for a variety of [sleep disorders](#), including apnea, insomnia, [restless legs syndrome](#), narcolepsy and [chronic fatigue syndrome](#).

College-aged students ideally should get 8-9 hours of sleep a night. Truth is, most students generally get much less.

"Any prolonged [sleep deprivation](#) will affect your mood, energy level and ability to focus, concentrate and learn, which directly affects your academic performance," Alapat adds.

Throw in the occasional all-nighter, consumption of caffeinated beverages like coffee, tea or [energy drinks](#), and students are at risk for developing insomnia, as well as increased risks for alcohol abuse and [motor vehicle accidents](#).

"A lot of college students graduate high school and leave the protective family environment where they have curfews or set bed times," Alapat says. "In college, they don't have these guidelines for sleep and recognize that they can stay up late. This likely contributes to the sleep deprivation seen commonly in college students."

Alapat's recommendations:

- Get 8-9 hours of sleep nightly (especially before final exams)
- Try to study during periods of optimal brain function (usually around 6-8 p.m.)
- Avoid studying in early afternoons, usually the time of least alertness
- Don't overuse caffeinated drinks (caffeine remains in one's system for 6-8 hours)
- Recognize that chronic sleep deprivation may contribute to development of long-term diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease

If suffering from bouts of chronic sleep deprivation or nightly insomnia that lasts for more than a few weeks, Alapat suggests consulting a sleep specialist.

Provided by Harris Health System

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