

Study finds homeschool students sleep better: Research supports later start times for high school

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(Medical Xpress)—In the first study of its kind, researchers have determined that teens who are homeschooled benefit from healthier sleep habits than those who go to most private and public schools. The findings provide additional evidence of teens' altered biological clocks and support an argument for starting traditional high school later in the morning.

"We have a school system that is set up so that the youngest children, who are awake very early in the morning, start school latest, and our [adolescents](#), who need sleep the most, are being asked to wake up and go to school at a time when their brains should physiologically be asleep," said Lisa Meltzer, PhD, a sleep psychologist at National Jewish Health in Denver, and lead author of the study.

"Adolescents need nine hours of sleep a night and if they're only getting seven hours, on average, by the end of the week they are a full ten [hours of sleep](#) behind schedule," said Meltzer, "and that impacts every aspect of functioning."

Meltzer and her colleagues charted the [sleep patterns](#) of 2,612 students, including nearly 500 who are homeschooled. They found that adolescent homeschooled students slept an average of 90 minutes more per night than public and private school students, who were in class an average of 18 minutes before homeschooled children even awoke.

"That cumulative [sleep deprivation](#) adds up," said Meltzer. "The ability to learn, concentrate and pay attention is all diminished when you haven't had enough sleep. But more than that, a [lack of sleep](#) can also impact a teenager's mood and their ability to drive early in the morning," she said.

If your teenager needs more sleep, why not just send them to bed earlier? "It's not that simple," said Meltzer. [Melatonin](#), the hormone that helps regulate our sleep, shifts by about two hours during [puberty](#). So, even if they wanted to get to sleep earlier, teenagers are battling [biological changes](#) in their bodies that are nearly impossible to overcome.

"It's not that they don't want to go to bed, but physiologically they simply can't fall asleep earlier. So, the logical solution is to allow them to sleep later," said Meltzer.

Fifteen-year-old Caelin Jones couldn't agree more. Jones, who lives in Denver, says he sets his alarm every morning for six o'clock to get to school on time, though he never quite felt fully awake until several hours later.

"Most days I would get to school and pretty much be the same as all the other kids. We were all just bleary-eyed and wondering why we had to be here at this time," he said.

Jones' sleep problems became so consuming that he sought sleep counseling through Dr. Meltzer at National Jewish Health. "It's made a big difference for me," said Jones, who has learned habits to help him wind down at night.

The study concluded that more than half (55%) of teens who were homeschooled got the optimal amount of sleep per week, compared to just 24.5% of those who attend public and private schools. Conversely,

44.5% of public and private school teens got insufficient sleep during the school week, compared to only 16.3% of homeschooled teens.

The differences are stark," said Meltzer. "Across the country, public and private schools that have changed their [high school](#) start times see considerable benefits. Students are tardy less often and graduation rates are actually higher," she said.

While you may not be able to change teenagers' biology, you can help them develop [healthier sleeping habits](#). Meltzer offers this advice:

- **Get all electronics out of the bedroom.** TVs, computers, video games and phones are major distractions for teens and often delay sleep.
- **Don't look at any screens 30-60 minutes before bed time.** Though turning off media is as simple as flipping a switch, the human brain does not work the same way. Being stimulated by media just before bed can make the [brain](#) too active to sleep.
- **Set up family charging stations** where mom, dad and the kids plug in their phones at night so they are out of reach.
- **Most importantly, set a consistent routine.** Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, even on weekends. This one habit can help regulate your body's internal clock and improve the quality of [sleep](#) you get.

Provided by National Jewish Health

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