

Quality—not quantity—of sleep linked to better health in teens

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With summer break and longer days ahead, parents of young teens may be wondering whether to let good sleep habits slide over the next couple of months. New research in *Preventive Medicine* by UBC's Annaliijn

Conklin, assistant professor of pharmaceutical sciences and scientist with the Centre for Health Evaluations and Outcome Sciences, suggests there are more benefits to a good night's sleep than simply feeling refreshed.

As she explains, she found that chronic, low-quality sleep was associated with poorer health outcomes among young B.C. students aged 13 to 17.

Why were you interested in looking at sleep in young people?

The public health discourse on healthy lifestyles has largely been focused on nutrition and physical activity, and I felt that there must be more to the story. Sleep is so fundamental to our health: it's a biological need that drives our circadian rhythm, affects our metabolism and influences many of our behaviors like eating and exercise. If we don't integrate it into our discussions on [public health](#), I feel we're missing a large part of the story.

What were your main findings?

We looked at a group of young people in B.C. aged 13 to 17 over a period of two years. We found that the kids who regularly had trouble falling or staying asleep were almost two and half times as likely to report sub-optimal (less than excellent) health compared to those who did not.

It was quite striking. Even if they had difficulty falling asleep just one night a week, if that was a regular occurrence over two years, it really seemed to affect their overall health. What was particularly interesting was that the relationship between chronic, poor-quality sleep and health outcome was stronger in the boys than it was in the girls.

Surprisingly, we found no relationship between poor health outcomes and those who chronically had less than eight hours sleep a night.

What should we take away from these findings?

We certainly can't attribute causation in this kind of observational study, but it does signal that cumulative sleep problems matter for the health of young people. It shows that there's definitely a link between poor health and chronic poor-quality sleep, which may be gender specific. I'm looking forward to seeing more research explore that connection.

Are there any insights here that parents can put into practice?

This study suggests that regular, good quality sleep is important for teen health. There are many recommendations around about sleep hygiene practices, and our findings do point to the need for parents to work on that. Other studies have specifically shown that late-night screen use and caffeine consumption have harmful consequences for falling sleep. Young people's health may benefit from [parents](#) enforcing sleep schedules and placing restrictions on screen time.

More information: Annalijn I. Conklin et al. Chronic sleep disturbance, not chronic sleep deprivation, is associated with self-rated health in adolescents, *Preventive Medicine* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2019.04.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2019.04.014)

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