

# Researchers refute common sleep myths about adolescents held by parents and caregivers

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As a new school year starts for teenagers, sleep health researchers are shining a light on some of the most common myths held by parents and

caregivers about their teens' sleep. A new study by investigators from Brigham and Women's Hospital, a founding member of the Mass General Brigham healthcare system, enlisted the help of experts in adolescent sleep to identify myths.

Brigham researchers then surveyed [parents](#) and [caregivers](#), finding that more than two-thirds believed in the top three most salient myths about sleep, including myths about the safety of taking [melatonin supplements](#), the ineffectiveness of later school start times and the harmlessness of altered bed and wake times on the weekend. In a paper published in *Sleep Health*, the authors explore the prevalence of each [myth](#) and present counterevidence to refute them.

"Adolescents face myriad barriers when it comes to sleep, some of which are physiological and others behavioral. Given these challenges, it is critical to reduce any modifiable barriers that stand in the way for young people when it comes to sleep. Our goal was to identify common [adolescent](#) sleep myths and inspire future public outreach and education efforts to promote evidence-based beliefs about sleep health," said corresponding author Rebecca Robbins, Ph.D., Investigator at the Brigham's Division of Sleep and Circadian Disorders and Instructor in Medicine at Harvard Medical School.

"Caregivers and adolescents commonly turn to the Internet and social media for guidance on topics such as sleep. Although these platforms can be sources of evidence-based information, there is the chance that misinformation can proliferate on these platforms."

The researchers surveyed 200 parents and caregivers about 10 sleep myths identified by experts. Some of the prevalent myths that Robbins and colleagues identified and deconstructed include:

**Myth:** "Going to bed and waking up late on the weekends is no big deal

for adolescents, as long as they get enough sleep during that time."

Approximately 74 percent of parents/caregivers agreed with this myth. But, the researchers explain, varying sleep schedules on the weekend—also known as "social jetlag"—can worsen sleep and does not restore sleep deficits. The authors cite studies showing that varying sleep schedules on the weekend can lead to lower [academic performance](#), risky behaviors, such as [excessive alcohol consumption](#), and increased mental health symptoms.

**Myth:** "If school starts later, adolescents will stay up that much later."

Approximately 69 percent of parents/caregivers reported belief in this myth. Robbins and colleagues cite numerous studies showing that delayed middle and high school start times resulted in significantly more sleep, with extended sleep in the morning and minimal impact on student bedtimes.

**Myth:** "Melatonin supplements are safe for an adolescent because they are natural."

Two-thirds of parents/caregivers believed this myth. While melatonin has become a common supplement for adults and adolescents, longer-term studies on its use are lacking, particularly when it comes to melatonin's effects on puberty and development. The content of melatonin in supplements varies widely. The authors also raise concerns about teens taking melatonin without medical evaluation or supervision, and without using behavioral interventions to help address insomnia.

The authors note that their study explored sleep myths among a small sample of parents/caregivers and future studies of a larger population of parents/caregivers may help to further clarify sleep beliefs. Future studies could also include adolescents themselves as well as experts from

other countries and cultures.

"Future research should aim to counter myths and promote evidence-based beliefs about adolescent sleep," said senior author Judith Owens, MD, MPH, of Boston Children's Hospital.

**More information:** Rebecca Robbins et al, Adolescent sleep myths: identifying false beliefs that impact adolescent sleep and well-being, *Sleep Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.sleh.2022.08.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleh.2022.08.001)

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