

HEALTH + DEVELOPMENT/SLEEP

# How Unhealthy Sleep Habits Can Affect Your Family's Well-Being

A sleep medicine physician explains why getting a good night's sleep is more important than you think

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Our workaholic culture has led to an epidemic of sleep deprivation. Feeling tired and worn out is almost a badge of honor for parents, and even kids complain of being tired all the time. But exhaustion isn't something we can just shrug off. Sleep deprivation is linked to serious health impacts; sleep is as

important to our well-being as exercise and eating well. And if your family has learned to prioritize healthy sleep patterns but you or your child still feels tired all the time, it might be a sign of an underlying medical condition.

## Not getting enough sleep impacts well-being

You might feel like there's just too much to do to get to bed at a reasonable hour, but Dr. Abigail Doyle, pulmonary, sleep medicine and critical care physician at Western Washington Medical Group warns, "Nothing good comes from not getting enough sleep."

The obvious impacts on daytime functioning are bad enough – walking around in a sleepy brain fog with no energy and a short temper. But Doyle says the most important impacts of sleep deprivation are "what you can't feel, which is all the stuff that's going on at a cellular level."

Sleep is especially important for kids. "For children, insufficient sleep is linked to impaired cognitive functioning, which can lead to poor academic performance. Lack of sleep also increases the risk of anxiety and depression later on." Sleep is critical for your child's healthy development.

But adults are not immune to the negative health effects either. "Sleep deprivation has been implicated in insulin resistance, which is one of the main causes of type 2 diabetes, and has been shown to be a risk factor in Alzheimer's dementia," says Doyle.

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"One of the red flags [for sleep disorders] is falling asleep in school." Photo: iStock

## Medical causes of sleep deprivation

When there is a [medical cause for sleep deprivation](https://www.wmedgroup.com/blog/pediatric-sleep-problems-what-you-can-do-when-to-seek-help/) (<https://www.wmedgroup.com/blog/pediatric-sleep-problems-what-you-can-do-when-to-seek-help/>), such as untreated sleep apnea, there is an increased risk of high blood pressure, metabolic syndrome and many other serious medical problems. Sleep apnea can occur in both children and parents.

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“With sleep apnea, you’re going to be looking for snoring and stopping of breathing during sleep,” she says. For kids, parents might also observe a change in mood, such as crankiness or hyperactivity. Obstructive sleep apnea, in which the airway becomes blocked by soft tissues, is becoming more common in all age groups as obesity rates increase — and in a vicious cycle, insufficient sleep can contribute to weight gain.

“But enlarged tonsils are still the number one cause of sleep apnea for kids,” says Doyle.

## **Non-medical causes of insomnia in kids and parents**

The most common cause of insomnia in children is behaviorally mediated, meaning kids develop learned difficulties in falling or staying asleep. While insomnia is more common in adults than children, children more commonly experience parasomnias, such as sleepwalking, sleep talking and night terrors.

“These tend to be more frightening for the caregiver than the child. Typically, we reassure caregivers that most kids will grow out of it,” says Doyle.

“One diagnosis that often gets overlooked, especially in children, is restless legs, because a lot of times children can’t communicate how they’re feeling. One thing that could be a potential indication to see your sleep specialist is they’re really having trouble keeping their legs still when they’re falling asleep, or they mention that they’re uncomfortable,” says Doyle. Because iron deficiency is implicated in restless leg syndrome, a blood test could be helpful for diagnosis.



“One of the red flags [for sleep disorders] is falling asleep in school. If you can’t figure out why, you should be seeking medical advice,” says Doyle. But she says, most of the time, it’s not hard to figure out why a child is tired. “If he’s not going to bed until midnight and he has to be up by 6:30 a.m., well, that’s obviously not enough sleep.” Insufficient sleep is the primary cause of daytime sleepiness in children.



*But adults are not immune to the negative health effects of sleep deprivation. Photo: iStock*

# How much sleep do people need, anyway?

Sufficient sleep varies by age and can be different for each person, but on average:

Infants need 15–17 hours, including naps

Preschoolers need 11–14 hours, including naps

Elementary students and tweens need 9–12 hours of sleep at night

Teens need 8–10 hours

Adults 7–8 hours

Although sleep requirements vary with age, the way to achieve them is through consistency. “The youngest of infants up to adults should have a consistent bedtime routine on weekdays and weekends to signal that it’s time to wind down and get ready for sleep,” says Doyle.

Creating age-appropriate sleep schedules and routines for all members of the family can be challenging, and every family will come up with its own solutions. A classic approach for younger children is bathtime, brushing teeth and bedtime stories. Cutting off screen time for older kids (and adults) when the younger ones start getting ready for bed is often a good idea.

# The connection between sleep and screen time

Screentime interferes with healthy sleep in three ways:

Excessive screen time during the day — including social media, movies, video games, etc. — cuts into time for other activities, thus reducing physical activity, which leads to poor sleep.

Social media is linked to mental health issues (<https://health.ucdavis.edu/blog/cultivating-health/social-medias-impact-our-mental-health-and-tips-to-use-it-safely/2024/05>), especially increased anxiety, which can make it hard to relax and fall asleep.

Bright lights and especially blue light from screens close to bedtime can disrupt circadian rhythms, leading to insufficient production of the melatonin needed to fall asleep.

## Improving sleep habits benefits everyone in the family

Exercise, caffeine and eating close to bedtime can also keep people awake when they should be sleeping. For adults, there is also the added temptation to be productive. It's almost impossible for parents of young children not to have tasks they can only complete when the kids are asleep. "But don't try and tackle it all, which is easier said than done. But there has to be some wind down time for adults as well," says Doyle, who admits she, too, rushes through chores after the kids go to bed.





*A classic approach for a sleep schedule for younger children is bathtime, brushing teeth and bedtime stories. Photo: iStock*

She recommends setting aside at least 30 minutes after the household tasks to wind down before bed, even if it means accomplishing less. “The other thing is, try not to take your problems to bed.” Setting aside time to worry or make a to-do list can help you set things aside for tomorrow. When your family is depending on you, it’s hard to make the changes that improve parental sleep. But it’s not just important to your own health, you are also modeling healthy behavior for your children to adopt as they get older.

For many busy families, a healthy sleep routine might sound like a fantasy. But if your child gets home with barely enough time for dinner before bed – or even not enough hours to sleep before getting up for school the next day – it might be time to make some hard choices. We have to make sleep a priority for the whole family, because no activity is as valuable to you and your child as consistently good sleep.

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