

SLEEP FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH



Sleep is critical for physical and mental health, but many children and youth just don't get enough. Lack of sleep can cause a number of health problems and have a big impact on your child's school performance, behaviour and mental health. Trouble sleeping can also be a symptom of physical or mental health problems.

The good news is that there are lots of things you can do at home to help your child sleep better.

How does sleep usually happen?

The brain has an internal clock that tells us when we need to sleep. When it becomes dark outside in the evening, this clock starts to produce melatonin — a brain chemical that makes us feel sleepy.

How much sleep does my child/youth need?

Age	Recommended sleep
Age 3-5 (Preschoolers)	10-13 hours per day
Age 6-12 (school-aged children)	9-12 hours per day
Age 13-18 (youth)	8-10 hours a night

Source: Recommended amount of sleep for pediatric populations, from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, 2016.

What happens if my child/youth doesn't get enough sleep?

All sorts of problems can happen when children/youth don't get enough sleep. Lack of sleep can cause:

- mood problems like irritability
- troubles concentrating which can resemble an attention deficit disorder
- physical health problems like being sedentary, and less active

How can I help my youth sleep?

What to do in the morning

- Start the day with love and affection. Reconnect with your child in the morning with a smile, kind words, and a hug.
- Keep the same wake up time on weekdays and weekends. The body's internal clock works best with regular bedtimes and wake up times. If your youth feels the need to sleep in on the weekends, aim for earlier bedtimes on weekdays so that they don't need to play catch up.



What to do during the day

- Build a strong relationship with your child. When your teen feels connected to you, your child will feel safer, which makes it easier for them to sleep at night. Tension and conflict make your child feel less safe, which can contribute to sleep problems. It also makes it harder for your child to accept your guidance about issues such as sleep.
- Talk about sleep with your child. Ask them if they would like your advice, or if they would rather that you simply listen. If your child thinks they have a solution, agree to let them keep on trying their strategies. But make it clear that if they continue to struggle with fatigue or have troubles getting up on time, you may need to take more parental control.
- Use “connection before direction”. Connect through listening, empathizing and validating their feelings. If you feel you need to give advice, then ask if they are open to your advice.
- Spend at least 1.5 hours outside during daylight hours. Natural light from outside helps set the body's internal clock. Studies show its also important for helping your child eyes grow properly and prevent nearsightedness.
- Ensure your child gets 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day, ideally outdoors. Be an active family, with rituals such as family walks, biking after dinner, playing road hockey or taking a yoga class. Wind down any physical activity in the early evening—being too active late can get your child ‘revved up’, making it more difficult to fall asleep.
- Give healthy meals and snacks. Eating healthy, and limiting processed foods and excess sugar can help ensure good sleep. Canada’s food guide can help you plan balanced meals and snacks.
- Avoid caffeine and energy drinks. While your youth may want to rely on these drinks to stay alert during the day, they can further disrupt sleeping patterns. If your child absolutely must have caffeine, make sure it's consumed before lunchtime.
- Limit naps. Some youth are really tired when they get home from school. A short nap can be helpful, but long naps will interfere with night time sleep. Keep after school naps short, no more than 30-60 minutes.



What to do in the evening

- Have an electronic curfew. Let your child know that screens must be turned off 1-2 hours before bed and handed in to recharge in a different room. If your child has a device with them, it's just too hard to resist the temptation to not check it during the night.
- Keep recreational screens such as TVs and gaming consoles out of bedrooms to avoid the temptation,
- Have a regular bedtime routine. Typical routines include: brushing your teeth, having a bath or shower, putting on your PJs, going to your room and doing relaxing activities such as reading, drawing, writing, or listening to calming music.
- Keep things dark. The sun produces lots of blue light, which promotes wakefulness. When it's dark, our brains will make the melatonin needed to fall asleep. Use curtains or blinds to block out light. Some people like to wear eye masks.



- Limit blue light. Keeping things dark and avoiding screens will help reduce blue light and help your brain produce melatonin before bed. Other ways to limit blue light is to wear low blue light glasses an hour before bed. You can also replace light bulbs in the bedroom with red or orange LED light bulbs.
- Figure out if your child sleeps better with quiet or background noise. Most people sleep better when it's quiet. However, some youth do better with some background noise, like from a fan or radio.
- Consider weighted blankets. Some people sleep better under a heavy blanket, or even a weighted blanket.
- Try to keep pets out of the bed. Although many pet owners like sleeping with their pets, studies show that pets in the bed can disturb sleep. If your youth is having trouble with sleep, find a place for the pet on the floor or in a different room.

Is your child still struggling with sleep problems despite your help?

Consider helping them using the 'stimulus control' technique. This is a highly effective strategy that can help your child reassociate their bed and bedroom with sleep. It also helps set a healthy bedtime routine.

The key steps are:

1. Use the bed only for sleep. Do not allow your child to read, use their computer, or do other 'activating' activities while in their bed.
2. Avoid napping during the day.
3. Encourage them to go to sleep only when they are tired.
4. Wait 30 minutes after being in bed to see if they fall asleep. If they can't sleep, let them get out of bed and do something relaxing and boring somewhere else until they are feeling tired enough to try again.
5. Wake your child up at the same time every morning.

Still having sleep problems?

If your child or youth is still struggling, speak to your their health-care provider for help. There may be physical health issues, anxiety, stress or other issues that are contributing.



Need more information?

[Cheo.on.ca](http://cheo.on.ca) is the best place to find information on CHEO's programs and services and learn about a variety of health topics for children and youth. Visit our online resource section to access CHEO-recommended websites, books, apps, videos and more!