

But I'm Not Tired!

by Alice Park

Experts say that U.S. kids are not getting enough sleep. Are you?

Lauren Schloss, 10, tries to get to bed on time. But it seems like something always comes between her and her pillow. Like swimming practice, which runs to 7:30 p.m. every Wednesday and Friday. Or play practices and ski club, which also keep the fourth-grader from State College, Pennsylvania, from getting home before dark. Then there's gymnastics on Mondays, and other days when Lauren doesn't get home until 6, after her parents pick her up from an after-school program. All of this means a late start on dinner and homework. No wonder Lauren admits that "on the weekends, I like to sleep in."

Sound familiar? Skimping on sleep has become a bad habit for most American kids. According to a new survey by the National Sleep Foundation, 51% of kids ages 10 to 18 go to bed at 10 p.m. or later on school nights, even though they have to get up early. Last year the foundation reported that nearly 60% of 7- to 12-year-olds said they felt tired during the day, and 15% said they had nodded off at school.

Many young night owls figure they can catch up on sleep over the weekend. Wrong! Sleep researchers have learned that when you regularly fail to get enough sleep, it takes more than just a few hours on Saturday and Sunday mornings for your body to recover.

The Right Amount of Sleep

How much sleep you need depends a lot on your age. Babies need loads of rest: most of them doze about 18 hours a day! Adults need about eight hours. For most school-age children, 10 1/2 hours is ideal. But the new Sleep Foundation survey found that 35% of 10- to 12-year-olds get only seven or eight hours. And guess what almost half of the surveyed kids said they do before bedtime? Watch TV.

"More children are going to bed with TVs on, and there are more opportunities to stay awake, with more homework, the Internet and the phone," says Dr. Mary Carskadon, a sleep

researcher at Brown University Medical School. She says these stimulating activities at bedtime can get kids all charged up and make it hard for them to settle down and sleep.

Experts say teenagers have the biggest sleep debts of all, and it's not just because they are busy with sports, jobs and homework. Part of the problem is chemical. Researchers have found that changing levels of body chemicals called hormones not only make teenagers' bodies develop adult characteristics but also make it hard for teens to fall asleep before 11 p.m.—and even harder for them to wake up in time for school.

Too Tired to Think!

So what's the big deal if you're a bit tired? Getting too little sleep can affect your mood, your coordination, how well you learn and even your speech. Studies of people who volunteer to go without sleep have shown that they have trouble with memory and can't concentrate well enough to do such simple tasks as adding two numbers. The biggest change, though, comes in your mood. Exhaustion makes you grouchy and depressed.

Because sleepiness is such a problem for teenagers, some school districts have decided to start high school classes later than they used to. Three years ago, schools in Edina, Minnesota, shifted the start time from 7:25 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. Students, parents and teachers are pleased with the results.

"I definitely see a difference," says Josh Inouye, an Edina tenth-grader. "I'm completely awake in my first [class], where before I was tired for the first few hours of school." Teachers in Edina report that fewer students are falling asleep in class, and many are getting better grades since they've been getting more sleep.

Even if your school starts early, there are things you can do to stay rested. Try going to bed at the same time every night. Develop a relaxing routine right before bedtime (Hint: reading is good!). And don't think of sleep as something to avoid. Your body needs rest to refuel for all the things you do during the day.