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## Ages & Stages

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### A Lullaby for Good Health

Many times, we adults deprive ourselves of the one thing that can help refresh our bodies and minds overnight: sleep. And as adults, we sometimes make choices that cause our sleep patterns to get out of whack.

But do your children have a choice when it comes to the amount of sleep they get? It is our duty to help them adopt healthy sleep habits while they're young so they can grow into happy, energetic, and healthy adults.

### Healthy Sleep

Because their bodies are growing, children need more sleep than adults. An important part of a child's healthy sleep is a steady bedtime routine, says Judith Owens, M.D., FAAP, co-author of *Take Charge of Your Child's Sleep: The All-in-One Resource for Solving Sleep Problems in Kids and Teens*. "At the end of the day, both the body and mind need to wind down, relax, and prepare physically and mentally for sleep," she says. "A bedtime routine is the best way to make sure that there is enough time to make that transition."

The body's natural cycles of sleeping and being awake are sometimes called circadian rhythms. These sleep patterns are regulated by light and dark. Children begin to develop a cycle around six weeks of age, and most have a regular pattern by three to six months.

### Troubled Sleeping

What is keeping our children awake? The National Sleep Foundation's (NSF) 2004 Sleep in America poll showed that about 69 percent of children age 10 and under experience some type of sleep problem. Some of the most common include the following conditions and occurrences:

- Insomnia occurs when a child complains of having trouble falling or staying asleep, or of waking up too early in the morning.
- Nightmares occur late at night during REM (rapid-eye movement) sleep and awaken a child.
- Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS) is a movement disorder that includes uncomfortable feelings in the legs, which cause an overwhelming urge to move.
- Sleep terrors (also called night terrors) occur early in the night. A child may scream out and be distressed, although he is neither awake nor aware during a sleep terror. Sleep terrors may be caused by not getting enough sleep, an irregular sleep schedule, stress, or sleeping in a new environment.
- Sleepwalking occurs when the child talks, laughs, or cries out in her sleep. As with sleep terrors, the child is unaware and has no memory of the incident the next day.
- Sleepwalking is experienced by as many as 40 percent of children, usually between ages 3 and 7.
- Snoring occurs when there is a partial blockage in the airway that causes the back of the throat to vibrate, creating the noise we all know. About 10 to 12 percent of normal children habitually snore.
- Sleep apnea occurs when snoring is loud and the child is having trouble breathing. Symptoms include pauses in breathing during sleep caused by blocked airway passages, which can wake the child up repeatedly.

### Lack of Sleep = Health Problems

Sleep deprivation in children has been linked with potentially serious health issues. These can include some of the most pressing illnesses facing American children today.

- **Anxiety and Depression:** Insomnia can contribute to anxiety by raising levels of cortisol, the stress hormone.



Sleep problems can also make other symptoms of depression worse and are much more common than oversleeping in people with depression.

- **Obesity:** "About two-thirds of the children diagnosed with sleep apnea in our clinic are overweight or obese," says Owens. Obese children tend to have more fat tissue around their neck, which puts more pressure on the airway and further block air from getting through to the lungs.
- **Diabetes:** New research presented at an American Diabetes Association conference showed that inadequate sleep may prompt development of insulin resistance, a well-known risk factor for diabetes.
- **Immunity problems:** Several nights of poor rest can hamper the production of interleukin-1, an important immune booster. A good night's sleep helps your child's body fight off illness and stay healthy.
- **ADHD:** A University of Michigan study published in the March 2002 issue of *Pediatrics* discovered that youngsters who often snore or have sleep problems are almost twice as likely to suffer from ADHD as those who sleep well. Other research has shown that children who don't get enough sleep tend to have more problems concentrating during the day.

## What Can Parents Do?

Talk to your pediatrician if you notice any of the following symptoms:

- An infant who is extremely and consistently fussy
- A child having problems breathing
- A child who snores, especially if it's loud
- Unusual awakenings
- Difficulty falling asleep and maintaining sleep, especially if you see daytime sleepiness or behavioral problems

## Sleep Tips

Here are some important things you can do to help your child get enough sleep.

- Set a regular bedtime for everyone each night and stick to it.
- Establish a relaxing bedtime routine, such as giving your child a warm bath or reading her a story.
- After one year of age, let your child pick a doll, blanket, stuffed animal, or other soft object as a bedtime companion.
- Do not allow a TV or computer in your child's bedroom.
- Avoid giving children anything with caffeine within six hours of bedtime, and limit the amount of caffeine children consume.
- Keep noise levels low, rooms dark, and indoor temperatures slightly cool.
- Talk to your pediatrician if your child has symptoms of RLS. There are several options for treating this condition.
- Talk to your pediatrician if your child is showing signs of sleep apnea. There are proven treatments for this condition, as well.

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The information contained on this Web site should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

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