

Independent Learning Newsletter Tips

Developing Positive Sleep Patterns

Some of the challenges students face is that during puberty hormones shift the teenager's body clock forward temporarily by about one or two hours, making them sleepier one to two hours later than adults would be. This change in the circadian rhythm seems to be due to the fact that the brain hormone melatonin is produced later at night for teens than it is for small children and adults. This can make it harder for teens to fall asleep early.

But then students have to get up for school causing a 'sleep debt' that can lead to chronic sleep deprivation. Other factors that contribute to insufficient sleep are: hectic extra-curricular schedules, television and gaming keeping students awake and late night light exposure (especially from computers and mobile phones) leading to inadequate production of the brain chemical melatonin that is responsible for making you feel sleepy.

There are unfortunately many ill effects from sleep deprivation: concentration difficulties, mentally 'drifting off' in class, shortened attention span, memory impairment, poor decision making, lack of enthusiasm, nightmares, moodiness and aggression, depression, skin problems, lowered immune system, lack of energy, risk-taking behaviour, cognitive impairment, cravings for unhealthy food leading to weight gain, slower physical reflexes, reduced sporting performance and reduced academic performance.

No-one wants to experience these! So what can we do to prevent sleep deprivation? Parents and students need to work together to find ways to increase the nightly quota of sleep. Some ideas to consider:

- Sleep in a bit (maximum 2 hours) on Saturday morning (students will like this one!).
- Avoid late nights on the weekend, try and go to bed the same time as you do during the week so you do not disrupt your sleep patterns.
- Get to bed early on a Sunday night.
- If you are not getting enough sleep work on adjusting the body clock by going to bed slightly earlier each day, perhaps 10 minutes earlier for a week. Then next week go to bed another 10 minutes earlier until you have adjusted to the right bed time for you so you get enough sleep.
- Limit afternoon naps to 30 minutes and gradually reduce these.
- Avoid caffeine (cola drink, coffee, energy drinks, chocolate) after dinner or even better, no later than 4pm.
- Organise as much as you can at night to minimise what you have to do in the morning (e.g. organise your clothes for the next day, pack your bag).
- Decide what time electronic devices will be switched off each night.
- Avoid watching TV for at least half an hour before you go to bed.
- Try and have an hour before you go to bed without computers or homework or chatting to friends.
- Set up a relaxing 'wind-down' routine for before you go to bed. Do this same routine every night (e.g. warm shower, reading, listening to quiet music) so your brain associates these activities with bed time and sleep.
- A drop in body temperature near bedtime triggers the sense that is time to go to sleep. So after a warm bath or hot shower, cool yourself down. It is also better at night to be cool rather than overheated.
- Keep your room as dark and as quiet as possible at night.

- When you lie in bed, start at your feet and mentally imagine relaxing each muscle as you slowly work your way up the body. Most people do not make it up to their head before they fall asleep!
- In the morning open the curtains wide or go out into the sun and get lots of light to help wake your brain.
- A healthy breakfast will help to kick-start student's body clock for the day.
- Avoid early morning starts or early morning activities if you can.
- Eat a healthy diet and ensure you get some exercise (but not late at night). These will both help to improve the quality of your sleep.
- Being exposed to lots of natural light during the day will also help the body produce the melatonin at the right time for a good sleep cycle.

It will take around 4-6 weeks of getting extra sleep regularly before you really feel the benefits, so hang in there!

So learn more this year about how to improve your results and be more efficient and effective with your schoolwork by going to the links section in your portal and opening the ELES handbook:

