# How might the sleep of teenagers be affected by COVID?

In terms of sleep, teenagers are a special group, where the physical changes of puberty and the development of relationships and social identity collide with demands of a 24-7 society and the busy schedules of education and learning.

Our modern lifestyles have squeezed out time asleep, reducing its importance to something that we put off, then eventually give in to, just to not be tired for the next day. On average, teenagers sleep one hour a day less now than twenty years ago, which is cutting a tenth of what you need, every night! It's no coincidence that levels of anxiety, fatigue, obesity and stress, and difficulties with mental health, depression, and attention are rising.

Sleep is so much more than just 'not awake'. It's even more important than eating and exercise, and absolutely vital for every single bodily function you can imagine: from cognitive skills such as memory and attention, to processing emotions, to physical growth, strength, mood, immunity… you name it…but it's very hard to get sufficient restful sleep as a teenager.

Sleep deals with all this!

Your body clock moves forwards, little by little, until it's nearly impossible to feel sleepy before late evening, but you still have to rise early for school, college or perhaps a part-time job. Forever trying to catch up on the weekends creates a cycle that gives a feeling of jet lag and risks creating longer term poor sleeping habits.

You need to feel in touch with your friends and all that's going on, so unplugging from social media or aiming to prioritise quiet time takes a lot of personal resolve and maturity.
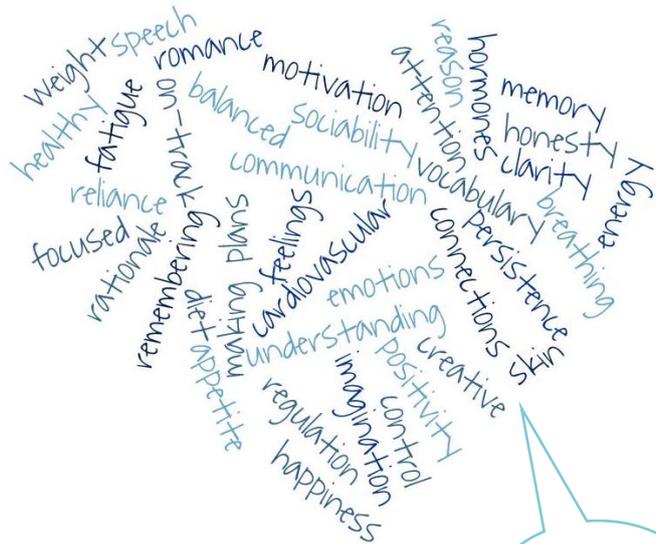
Hormonal changes make it hard to control responses and to think clearly when situations make you feel instant and powerful emotions such as anxiety, shame, guilt or anger.

Then, whilst you were busy navigating all that, **along came COVID.**

A global pandemic has affected the sleep of millions of people of all ages in lots of different ways. For teenagers, these might include:

Limited human contact

As teenagers you'd be likely to seek to socialise and the lockdown has reduced opportunities for contact in many forms such as exercise, schooling, time with friends, romance and sports. Social distancing has meant more time indoors, which means less sunlight to reset teenage body clocks. It has also created tensions with having to be in closer and prolonged proximity to parents, carers and family members, and perhaps also having to be 'taught' by them whilst studying at home.

Raised anxiety

In local and national surveys, many teens have said that they are feeling more anxious because of COVID. It's not surprising as it has brought sudden change and uncertainty, and without the daily distractions of going out and about, there's more time to ruminate on COVID-related worries.

You might have heard about or know someone who has directly experienced coronavirus and perhaps had to visit hospital. Whilst it appears to generally produce milder symptoms in younger people the virus can cause respiratory difficulties which impact on sleep quality.

It's also very likely that you feel more stress at the moment about family circumstances, finances, or health issues. These can feel monumental to think about without restorative sleep to help you approach difficulties with more emotional balance and reason. With uncertainty as to when this might end, and how the future might be different, it is important to focus only on what you are able to change, and to try and accept what is beyond your control.

More sitting

As a nation we are finding ourselves being less active and more sedentary behaviours in teens might go hand in hand with eating more, particularly if you are feeling lonely or bored. Sleep regulates the hormones that make you feel hungry or full and the impulsive behaviours to reach for cookies and crisps instead of fruit or vegetables. Being at home is likely to bring more temptation to eat or drink high calorie quick snacks, and that will impact weight.
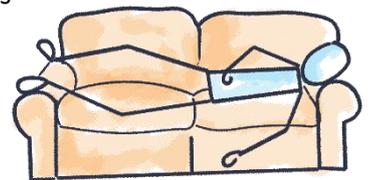
There is a lot of research to link poor sleep to increased appetite, and for shorter sleepers to have higher BMI (body mass index) scores. Weight gain can increase sleep disorders, so it is an important issue to be aware of.

Delayed sleep and media

With no school journey or registration to get to, it's likely that you're able to sleep in later in the mornings and whilst this could be a good thing to gain more sleep in the short term, it also means an increased opportunity for naps, and general poor sleep hygiene. These will be hard to reverse when your school or college fully reopens.

When you study at home, try to stay out of your bed, so that you aren't blurring the reasons for getting into bed and sleeping, with using your phone, table or laptop. You've probably heard of blue light being unhelpful to getting to sleep, but you might not know that teenagers are ten times more sensitive to blue light than adults, so even a little bit can keep you awake a long time.

Increasing the use of social media at night-time keeps your brain whirring and you might be putting yourself at a higher risk of cyber bullying or online safety issues if you're alone or making decisions when physically tired and emotionally less balanced. Suppressing sleep with the use of gadgets is likely to leave you in a more negative mood, finding it harder to concentrate and to show the kind, generous and helpful parts of your personality.

It's so important to try to value and prioritise your sleep. Look back at the word cloud above to remind you why it holds the keys to your successful future.

What can you do?

We have another download called 'Sleep and COVID' for a longer explanation… but here's the short version:

Light

Go out into natural light or position yourself close to a window: this resets the body clock and helps you feel awake. It's a vital part of the day. In the evening use dimmer lighting, and on gadgets use apps like twilight that reduce blue light.

Routine

Keeping a regular sleep/wake schedule is very important. Big shifts backwards or forwards – for example trying to 'catch up' sleep debt at the weekends, will make you feel jet-lagged.

Diet and exercise

Building in daily exercise in the morning or afternoon will promote deeper, more nourishing sleep. Avoid caffeine and stimulants such as energy drinks and foods high in sugar in the evenings. Don't go to bed too full, hungry or thirsty. Eat regularly and healthily across the day and find your own balance.

Sleeping environment

Make your bedroom a restful oasis of calm. You'll get better sleep and stay asleep when it's cool, dark, and quiet. If you can, use a firm mattress and lightweight bedding, turn down the temperature or open a window. If you have to keep a clock in your bedroom, turn it to face away so that it reduces anxiety or any need to clock-watch. Having a short shower before bed gives your brain another nudge towards sleepiness.

Relaxation before bed

Give yourself a golden hour and you'll improve your sleep. Blue light and activities such as gaming or scrolling through social media won't allow your brain to wind down and relax, so the first step is to turn off the screens and try something different. You might like mindfulness, relaxation, meditation, reading, an audiobook, colouring / hand-eye coordination e.g. mindful colouring

Talking about worries

Find time in daylight hours to talk through any worries you have with a trusted adult. At night-time, write them down if they're persistent, as this will help you not to ruminate on them without support.

And lastly… if you still can't sleep there are lots more ways to find support…

- ✓ **Keep a sleep diary**
- ✓ **Use a sleep tracker**
- ✓ **Use an app**
- ✓ **Contact local services for guidance: P&TS, Emotional Wellbeing Hub and The Source**

www.suffolk.gov.uk/children-families-and-learning/pts