

Sleep Advice for Autistic Teens

If you are experiencing sleep difficulties, you are not alone. Baker et al. (2013) found that autistic teenagers are three times more likely to experience sleep difficulties in comparison to non-autistic teenagers. Difficulties with sleep can negatively affect your concentration at school, your mental health and your relationships with others.

How does sleep work?

Sleep is a natural behaviour that we all have to do at some point every 24 hours. We do not switch off completely during sleep; our body and brain are busy processing information, repairing cells, and building our immune system.

Our circadian rhythm – also known as our body clock – helps tell us whether it is day or night. Our circadian rhythm expects certain things to happen at the right times. It should be light, warm, and busy during the day, and dark, cool and quiet at night time. We have to keep a regular routine to help set our body clock. We also need to be awake and active for long enough to feel tired at bedtime, so if you have a lie-in at the weekend, you will find it more difficult to fall asleep at your usual bedtime.

We also rely on two hormones that affect our sleep.

- 1) Melatonin – a hormone that is released when it gets dark. It is often called the ‘sleepy hormone’ because it tells the body that it is time to prepare for sleep. Our brain detects a change from light to dark and sends signals to release melatonin. Melatonin doesn't put us to sleep and is easily switched off.
- 2) Cortisol – sometimes called the stress hormone. It is released in the morning to help us wake up and prepare for the day's activities. Cortisol is also released into our bodies at times when we are under pressure as it helps us cope, even at bedtime, and stops our melatonin working. Autistic people often experience higher levels of cortisol as the world is a more stressful place.

As you get older and move into adolescence, you may find that you don't feel tired until later and want to sleep later in the morning than when you were younger. This is a natural change in your circadian rhythm during puberty. Your body clock can be set back by as much as 2 hours. This may mean you can concentrate better later in the day than younger siblings or parents and are more alert during the evening. The suggestions below will help you set your body clock and get your brain to release melatonin and cortisol at the right time to help you sleep better.



What are the effects of having poor sleep?

The cells in our body which fight infection and stop us from becoming ill are less effective when we are tired. Poor sleep has been linked with more frequent illnesses, as well as people feeling ill for longer. Additionally, research suggests poor sleep can result in a greater number of sports injuries, affecting our ability to engage with our favourite hobbies.

When we are tired, the part of our brain responsible for regulating our emotions is less effective. This is why people are often more irritable or easily upset when tired. Similarly, a lack of sleep leads to increase in our stress hormone, cortisol, which can make us feel more anxious.

When we are tired, we might also struggle to think creatively, which can affect our performance at school or college. Poor sleep has been linked to lower memory capacity and lower productivity- which can both affect academic performance.

Why are you having difficulties sleeping?

Autistic people may have different circadian rhythms and increased cortisol levels (our stress hormone) to non-autistic people due to differences in how sensory information is processed. Autistic individuals who are hyposensitive to light or sounds may not pick up on the cues (such as darkness) which prepare our body for sleep. Alternatively, autistic individuals who are hypersensitive to light or sound may have learned to block sensory cues to avoid sensory overload.

You may have:

- Trouble falling asleep- with it taking longer than 30 minutes to fall asleep

Difficulty staying asleep

Recent research (Pavlopoulou, 2020) suggests that good sleep practices suggested for non-autistic teenagers may not work for you. Instead, you might try:

- Having multiple versions of the same pyjamas to provide consistent sensory input.
- Removing labels from nightwear.
- Deep compression on upper legs and hands.
- Sleep with heavier bedding such as a double duvet, as long as it is not too hot.
- Having a fluffy item to hold such as a stuffed animal.



- Using a favourite smell consistently before bed such as essential oils, body lotion or lighting a candle. However, some smells such as lavender may be stimulating, and some people may feel that strong smells make them feel overwhelmed, so it is important to do what works for you.
- Having the edges of the bed visually defined through pillows, toys, or rails.
- Using a fan or white noise machine to block out background noise.
- App-based meditation.
- Speaking through the current day and your plans for the next day with a parent before sleep.
- Avoiding extracurricular activities during the week if they do not give you time to relax and do activities you enjoy.
- Engaging with your special interest or favourite items before bed. Use a timer if you need help with moving on.
- Doing things which bring you joy during the day.
- Give yourself decompression time after school or college to recover from the day.

A note on napping

Napping is generally not recommended once we reach school age. Napping for even 20 minutes after 3pm will delay your natural melatonin (that sleepy hormone) release by up to an hour.

However, sometimes when you have been struggling to sleep, a short nap can help you get through the day. For teenagers, the most common naps are when you go up to your room after school and lie on your bed to do homework or read and drop off. This still counts as a nap. The best thing to do if you are going to nap is to set an alarm so you don't sleep too long (20-30 minutes max) and the earlier the better.