Sleep Strategies for Teens with Autism Spectrum Disorder

A Guide for Parents

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Autism Intervention Research Network on Physical Health

These materials are the product of on-going activities of the Autism Speaks Autism Treatment Network, a funded program of Autism Speaks. It is supported in part by cooperative agreement UA3 MC 11054, Autism Intervention Research Network on Physical Health (AIR-P Network) from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau (Combating Autism Act of 2006, as amended by the Combating Autism Reauthorization Act of 2011), Health Resources and Services Administration, Department of Health and Human Service to the Massachusetts General Hospital.

This booklet is designed for families of teens with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Many people with ASD have trouble with sleep throughout their life. This can be stressful for them and for their families. The major sleep problems are trouble falling asleep and waking often at night. These problems are often related, so creating habits that help someone fall asleep more easily may also help them stay asleep during the night.

Trouble falling asleep

Waking often at night

The ideas presented here are based on research and on the experience of sleep experts. They are addressed to parents but can be used by parents and teens to help solve some of the most common sleep troubles. The teen years are a time of change -- even if a child has slept well when younger, sleep patterns may change as well! As you review this booklet, please keep in mind that there are many factors that cause sleep problems in teens with ASD. These include medical concerns (discussed later in this booklet) and sleep habits. This brochure will focus on healthy sleep habits that you can help your teen put into place. These habits can help sleep even if there are medical concerns. Even if you have tried these strategies when your child was younger, it may be helpful to revisit them now that your child is a teen.

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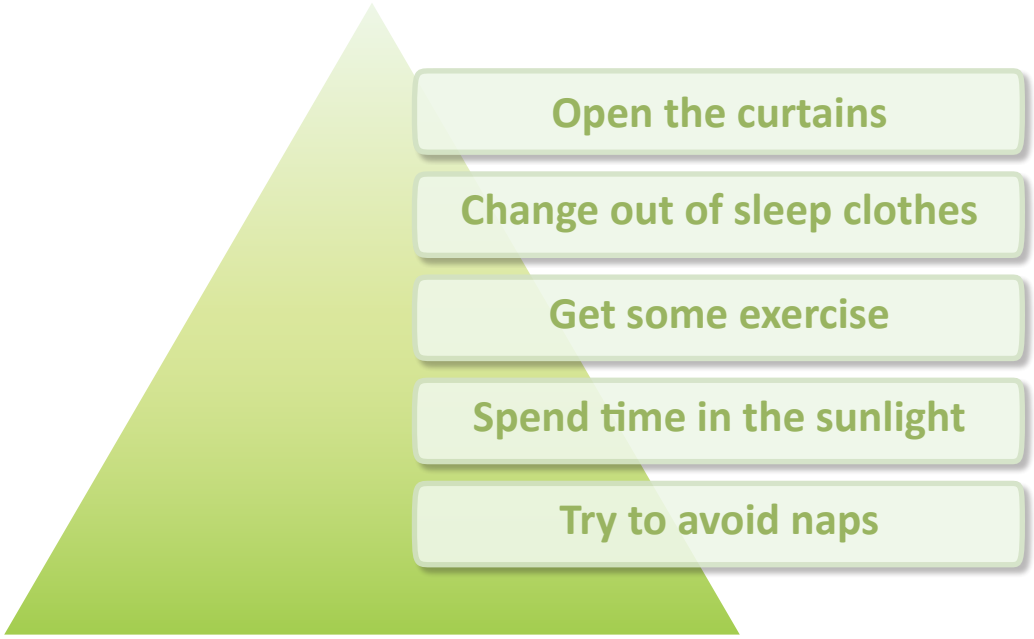
Habits and Routines

Solving these problems means teaching your teen new habits and new schedules. Make sure your teen has a say in what new habits and routines he/she wants to try. The changes will be easiest and work best if everyone who helps your teen with daily routines knows and uses the strategies you and your teen choose.

Regular Schedule

There are activities teens can do during the day that will help them sleep better at night. Waking up and getting out of bed about the same time each day is as important as going to bed about the same time each night. Other daytime activities can also help a teen sleep by making a big difference between nighttime and daytime:

- Open blinds/curtains or turn on a light when you first wake up.
- Change out of sleep clothes into regular clothes when you first wake up.
- Physical exercise is also important! We recommend 20-30 minutes of exercise three to four times a week. Exercising in the morning or afternoon is best to promote sleep. Exercise too close to bedtime can interfere with sleep.
- Plan time to be outside in the sunlight each day, the earlier the better.
- Try to avoid naps during the day. If you nap, try to sleep for less than 45 minutes and no later than 4 p.m.



Good Food Habits

What your teen eats and when he/she eats it can affect his/her sleep. Having breakfast around the same time each morning fits into the daytime routine. Family dinners are encouraged, but if they are heavy meals, try to serve them several hours before bedtime. Then your teen can enjoy a light snack close to bedtime. Just be sure to try to avoid foods and drinks that contain caffeine, particularly in the 3 to 4 hours before bedtime. Soda, coffee, chocolate, tea and even some medications contain caffeine. Milk and fruit juices do not contain caffeine and are safe choices for afternoon and evening meals or snacks.

No Caffeine

- Milk
- Water
- Juice

Caffeine

- Coffee
- Tea
- Soda
- Chocolate

Evening Routine

After a day of light and activity, you and your teen will need to make the evening time quiet and calm. This means slowly cutting down exciting, busy activities and choosing things that relax your teen. Different people relax in different ways so you may need to decide what is and what is not calming. Some of these habits can help teens relax:

Wind down in the evening

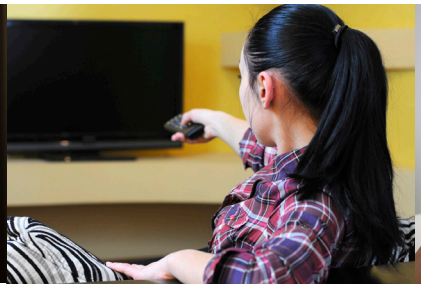
- Close the curtains
- Dim the lights

Try turning off screens

- Television, computers, and other "screen time" off 30 minutes before bedtime

Eat a light snack

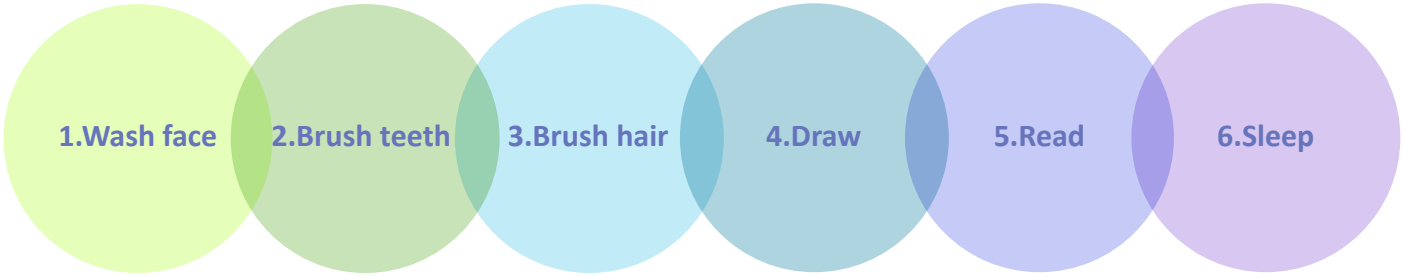
- No heavy or spicy food



Regular Bedtime Habits

Instead of just going to bed after homework and chores are done, your teen can help get his/her body and mind ready for sleep in just 15 to 30 minutes. Doing the same things in the same order every night becomes a kind of sign to your teen's body that bedtime is near.

Here is a sample bedtime routine



Having a schedule like this that you and your teen can look at each evening can help him/her keep the same basic order. The bedtime routine should include activities your teen finds relaxing and easy. Post the schedule of activities where it is most likely to help your teen remember the schedule. Having pictures or a checklist can help some teens remember to keep the routine in the same order every night. The checklist can also help provide a cue to your teen's body that bedtime is near. As an added benefit, following this checklist before bedtime will help your teen relax and stay asleep during the night.

Bedtime Routine Checklist

1. Take a shower
2. Put on pajamas
3. Have a snack and take prescribed medications
4. Use the bathroom and wash hands
5. Brush teeth
6. Listen to quiet music for 10 minutes
7. Puzzle for 10 minutes
8. Go to sleep

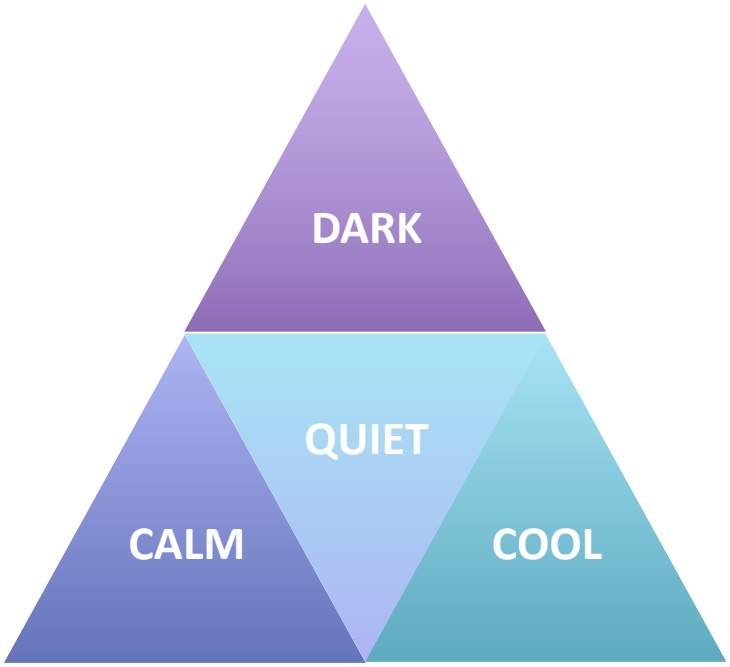
We realize that visual schedules may not fit the needs of every teen and family. Some teens may prefer tools other than a visual schedule. These can include working with your teen (perhaps with the help of a teacher or therapist) to find visual cues that remind him/her when to go to bed or quiet activities to do when he/she wakes up.

A Comfortable Sleep Setting

There are ways to make the place where your teen sleeps as calm and quiet as possible. These things may help your teen fall asleep more easily, stay asleep through the night, and sleep more soundly.

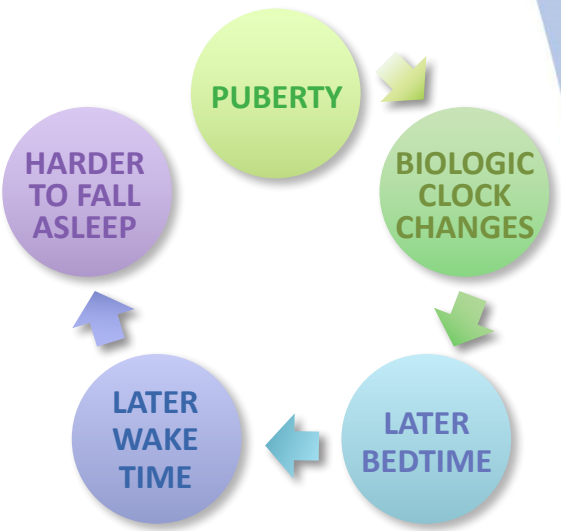
Many teens use their beds for homework, watching TV or talking on the telephone. Try to have your teen do those things somewhere other than his/her bed. Also, be aware of noises from the rest of the house that may bother your teen during the night. Try to keep the bedroom:

Dark -	Use curtains or shades to block lights from outside (nightlights are OK if needed). Keep the amount of light in the room as consistent as possible throughout the night.
Quiet -	Keep the room quiet. Some teens like white noise like a ceiling fan to help drown out other sounds. If your teen uses these, it is best to choose a sound that stays the same through the night (like a fan) rather than a sound that may change or turn off during the night (like a radio).
Consistent -	Set up the sleeping area so it looks and feels the same all night. Avoid having pillows or objects that may scatter as your teen sleeps. This consistency can help your child stay asleep throughout the night.
Calm -	Take out distractions like cell phones, tablets or laptops, video games or TV.
Cool -	Set the temperature for less than 75 degrees.
Comfortable -	Provide sleep clothes and covers that suit his/her preference.



Teen Sleep Practices

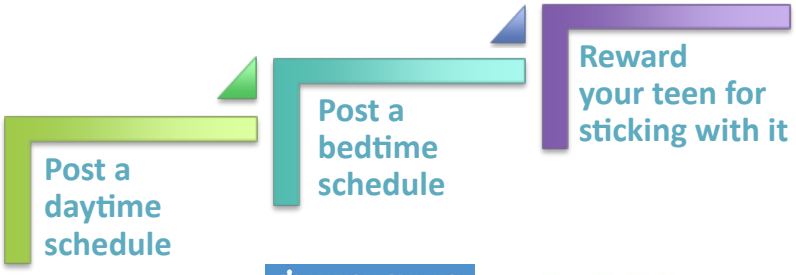
All teens have a schedule change when they go through puberty. What we call their "clock" shifts so that they don't feel tired or sleepy at the time they have been going to bed and they don't want to wake up as early either. Instead of trying to make your teen go to bed when he/she is not sleepy, try moving his/her bedtime later by half an hour or an hour. Keep in mind he/she may still need about 9 hours of sleep. And remember that the new, later bedtime needs to work with your family's evening routine. Most importantly, he/she and you need to be able to stick to the same bedtime and wake time every day, with no more than an hour's difference between weekdays and weekends.



Post Reminders

Changing habits is hard. Visual reminders can help keep you and your teen on track. Rewards for keeping up with the changes can help until the new habits sink in. Here are some ideas:

- Post a bedtime routine schedule on your teen's wall. Use graphics, photos, cartoons or simply words to remind you and your teen of the steps and the order in which he/she does them.
- Post a daytime routine schedule on your teen's wall. Just like the bedtime routine, use graphics, photos, cartoons or just words to remind your teen of the steps and the order in which he/she does them.
- More ideas for reminders and help can be found at www.autismspeaks.org. Look for **Visual Supports and Autism Spectrum Disorders** under the **Toolkits** section of the website.
- Think of a reward for your teen for keeping up the routines. This could be a special breakfast treat, a walk with the family, a trip to the mall or anything your teen enjoys. You and your teen may decide on a bigger reward for keeping up the routine for a longer length of time.



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If the suggestions in this booklet are not successful, please consult your health care provider for advice and a possible referral to a sleep center. As mentioned earlier, many factors can contribute to sleep problems in teens with ASD. These include medications and medical concerns such as anxiety, snoring, sleepwalking or other movements in sleep, seizures, and bedwetting. If your teen has any of these symptoms or any others of concern, consulting with your health care provider should be the next step in treatment.

We hope the suggestions in the booklet have been helpful. We encourage you to share this brochure with your teen's health care provider and discuss any additional suggestions he or she may have for helping your teen sleep.

Resources

The Autism Speaks Family Services Department offers resources, tool kits, and support to help manage the day-to-day challenges of living with autism www.autismspeaks.org/family-services. If you are interested in speaking with a member of the Autism Speaks Family Services Team contact the Autism Response Team (ART) at 888-AUTISM2 (288-4762), or by email at familyservices@autismspeaks.org.

ART en español al 888-772-9050.

Acknowledgments

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