

# Sleep



Many kids and teenagers with autism have problems sleeping which can be hard on the child and caregivers<sup>3; 4</sup>. Some have trouble falling and staying asleep, or wake up too early and have a hard time getting back to sleep<sup>1; 2</sup>.

Problems sleeping happen more often if the child has restricted and repetitive behaviors (lining up toys, rocking, hand-flapping)<sup>5</sup>, anxiety<sup>6</sup>, or sensory problems<sup>2</sup> and can lead to having trouble paying attention, feeling restless, getting angry, and throwing tantrums<sup>7; 8</sup>.

Watching TV, videos, or playing on the computer, especially if the shows or games are scary or violent, can lead to kids with autism having more trouble sleeping<sup>9</sup>. All kids and teenagers with autism should be checked for trouble sleeping<sup>10; 11</sup>, by asking specific questions about bedtime, waketime, daytime and nighttime habits and bedtime routines<sup>3; 12; 13</sup>. Then the parents can learn ways to help their child sleep better, for instance by cutting back on computer or video game time<sup>9</sup>. Teaching parents about sleep habits<sup>14</sup>, and sometimes using the right medicine can help kids with autism sleep better<sup>15</sup>.

*\*Disclaimer: This summary is based on research conducted by Autism Treatment Network (ATN) members. It is not a summary of the entire body of research literature available on this subject*

## Frequently Asked Questions

### WHAT HAPPENS TO THE CHILD/TEENAGER?

- Some have trouble falling and staying asleep (1; 2)
- Some wake up too early and have a hard time getting back to sleep (1; 2)

### WHEN DO WE SEE THIS HAPPENING?

Problems sleeping happen more often:

- If the child/teen has restricted and repetitive behaviors (lining up toys, rocking, hand-flapping) (5)
- If the child/teen has anxiety (6)
- If the child/teen has sensory problems (2)

### WHAT ARE SOME ACTIVITIES THAT CAUSE PROBLEM SLEEPING?

- Watching TV\*
- Watching Videos\*
- Playing on the computer\*
- Being exposed to light from screens (phones, tablets, TVs, computers)

\* If the shows or games are scary or violent (9).

### WHAT IS THE RESULT OF PROBLEM SLEEPING?

Lack of sleep can lead to Children or Teenagers:

- Having trouble paying attention (7; 8)
- Feeling restless (7; 8)
- Getting angry (7; 8)
- Throwing tantrums (7; 8)
- Having low energy (7; 8)

### WHAT SHOULD PARENTS DO?

Parents can learn ways to help their child sleep better, for instance by cutting back on computer or video game time (9; 14).

- Talk with your health care provider or therapist to learn about sleep habits.
- If you are not sure, ask them what to look for. What information do they need from you to help your child/teen with their problem sleeping?
- Keep track of your child's sleep habits by asking questions about bedtime, waketime, daytime and nighttime habits and bedtime routines (3; 12; 13).
- A sleep specialist can also keep track of sleeping habits with a special activity monitor (actigraph) which is much more accurate than a FitBit.

Take your findings to your next appointment. All children and teens with ASD should be checked for trouble sleeping (10; 11). Health care providers can help you and your child/teen to learn good sleep strategies and may prescribe medications to help children and teens with autism sleep better (15).

## References

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