

Sleep Needs Across the Lifespan



Important Things to Know About Sleep Needs Across the Lifespan

- Sleep need gets less with age until around 20 years old when it stabilises.
- How much and how fast this happens depends on the person.
- It is normal for children to have daytime naps until 3 to 5 years old.
- If a child takes naps often past this age, he or she might not be sleeping enough at night.
- Teenagers will tend to want to go to bed later, and sleep in.
- Older people spend more time in bed, but their sleep requirement is normally similar to that of early adult life.

How do our sleep needs change with age?

It is well known that as children get older they need less sleep. Different people have different sleep needs. The advice in the table below is only a guide. You can make a good guess if a person is sleeping enough at night - observe at how they act and function during the day.

AGE GROUP	TOTAL SLEEP (hrs/day)	SLEEP AT NIGHT (hrs)	SLEEP DURING DAY (hrs)
NEWBORNS (0 - 2 mths)	12 - 18	6 - 9	6 - 9
INFANTS (2 - 12 mths)	14 - 15	9 - 12	2.5 - 5
TODDLERS (1 - 3 yrs)	12 - 15	9.5 - 11.5	1.5 - 3.5
PRESCHOOL (3 - 5 yrs)	11 - 13	Most sleep is at night.	Daytime naps become rarer. A child tends to stop napping at this age.
SCHOOL-AGE (5 - 12 yrs)	9 - 11	All sleep should be at night.	Naps at this age tend to be from not getting enough sleep at night.
TEENAGERS (12 - 18 yrs)	8.5 - 9.5	All sleep should be at night.	Naps at this age tend to be from not getting enough sleep at night.
ADULTS	7 - 9	All sleep should be at night.	Naps at this age tend to be from not getting enough sleep at night.

Note that these are average sleep requirements: some people require more and others less.

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How does napping change with age?

From birth to two months of age, the length of one period of sleep can be from 30 minutes to 3 - 4 hours. This is throughout the day and night. Babies fed from the bottle tend to sleep for longer at a time than breast-fed babies (3-4 hours versus 2-3 hours). See also [Tips to Help Babies Sleep Better](#).

From 2 months onwards babies start to sleep for longer at a time. This is especially so at night between 12 midnight and 5am. The reason for this is that they start to develop their internal day-night (circadian) rhythm that favours sleep at night and being more awake during the day.

By 6 months of age, babies can get 5 - 8 hours of sleep at night. However 25-50% of 6 month olds still wake up at night. There are things that can be done to counteract this including ensuring that they learn to go to sleep in their cot by themselves at the start of the night. Then they are more able to self-soothe themselves back to sleep after waking up during the night.

From 2 months to 12 months, the number of daytime naps goes down from 3 - 4 naps to two naps. Morning naps usually stop between 12 and 18 months of age.

Always give a chance for an afternoon nap after lunch and before 4pm. Daytime naps become less common from about 2 or 3 years onwards.

Consistent daytime naps after 5 years of age are not normal. The child might not be getting enough sleep at night. This may be due to poor sleep routines, sleep problems or sleep disorders. It may need to be followed up with a Sleep Specialist.

See also [Behavioural Sleep Problems in School Aged Children](#) and/or [Children's Sleep Disorders](#).

Why do teenagers want to stay up later?

In this age group, there is a change in the timing of sleep. It is natural for them to want to go to bed later at night and to sleep in. However this should be within reason and teenagers often need to be taught good sleep habits. They need to know that they won't function as well during the day if they miss sleep and fail to catch up on it. See also [Teenage Sleep](#).

Adult sleep

Sleep requirements stabilize in early adult life, around the age of 20. Individuals vary in their sleep needs but most adults require between 7 and 9 hours a night to feel properly refreshed and function at their best the next day. Many try to get away with less sleep. There are some who are genuine short sleepers while others may require considerably more than the average requirement. The reasons for this individual variability in sleep requirement are not well understood.

Older adults spend more time in bed but unless a sleep problem has developed the requirement for sleep is similar to that in their younger adult life.

For further information see:

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au or
www.sleepfoundation.org

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A voluntary group offering assistance and support to people and their families living with sleep disorders

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The peak national association of clinicians and scientists devoted to investigation of sleep and its disorders

Disclaimer - Information provided here is general in nature and should not be seen as a substitute for professional medical advice.

Ongoing concerns about sleep or other medical conditions should be discussed with your local doctor.

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