

Dispelling Some Myths about Sleep

PERCEPTIONS ABOUT TIME change over generations. Before electricity, people spent at least half their days in the dark or candlelight. Guess what? They slept more. Sleep researchers at the National Institutes of Health studied a group of men who felt comfortable with seven hours sleep a night in a situation that replicated pre-electricity conditions—they were in the dark 14 hours a day. Guess what? They slept more. At first their bodies responded as if they were recovering the rest they needed, and they slept 14 hours a night. Finally, they routinely slept for nine hours.

I'm not suggesting that we go back to candlelight—except for romance and self-soothing. However, I do think it's important to remain actively curious about the amount of sleep both adults and children need, and to resist the urge to keep going just because we have light bulbs that allow it. There are many myths about sleep, probably because so many of our ideas about the subject are conditioned by our culture. Our recent time change provides a good reason to think about sleep and some of the lore surrounding nocturnal happenings.

Myth 1: When it gets dark later, children should change bedtimes. The experts say “No!” Children should keep the same nighttime and nap routines, though initially it may take them a little longer to fall asleep.

Myth 2: Children who are tired act sleepy. Have you ever felt “wired” when you didn't get enough sleep? Children are often more active when they haven't slept enough, though they are less capable of paying attention. Night routines don't have to involve less light, but they should include much less stimulation and lots of soothing togetherness.

Myth 3: Sleeping with parents makes children less independent. This is definitely a cultural myth. In China, where mothers commonly sleep with their babies, sudden infant death syndrome is virtually unknown. There are crucial safety rules for sleeping with babies, but fostering independence isn't the issue. See www.healthychildren.com/safesleep.org.

Myth 4: Older children are too old for naps. In many countries, adults and older children take naps every day. When your child is tired, suggest a nap or take a siesta as a family.

Myth 5: There are no long-term effects of getting by on less sleep. Studies show that children who get less sleep than they need are more prone to childhood obesity. Adults who routinely get less sleep may be cutting years off their life span.

Of course, everyone's sleep needs are individual, but it's important to track sleep and its effects on our bodies at every age. Children will push us to stay up later, especially when stimulated by TV. You can become a good role model for taking care of sleep needs by being diligent about getting enough rest and commenting how good you feel when you are fully restored.

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