

Teens are getting less sleep than ever before, and experts are calling it a national health crisis. Read on to learn the shocking consequences—and real strategies for getting the rest you so desperately need.

It was the last class of the day, and George Sinclair's eyelids felt like bricks. He tried to pay attention to his teacher, but his chin kept dropping toward his chest. George was operating on an hour of sleep after staying up to rehearse a history presentation and study for finals, so this one last period was feeling like an eternity.

Finally, the bell rang, and George headed to his pickup truck to make the 25-minute drive to his home in El Cajon, California. He blasted music to try to stay alert, but as he turned onto his street, no sound was strong enough. George nodded off.

When he jerked awake, his truck was veering across the road. It flipped on its side and slammed into a fence; a post crashed through the windshield, missing him by inches.

"The two-by-four was under my armpit," George recalls.

"The car alarm went off, and I had to step on the board to climb out. I am so lucky to be alive."

You know drinking or using drugs is dangerous, but the latest research shows that not getting enough sleep—like 85 percent of teens—can be just as hazardous. Missing just two hours of shut-eye quadruples your risk of a car accident and affects your decision-making—like George's choice to get behind the wheel.

What's more, experts say the teen sleep crisis is fueling a rise in mental-health issues and suicide. "Teens are getting less sleep now than ever before," says Dr. Nathaniel Watson, a sleep specialist at the University of Washington. "This is a public health epidemic."

FEELING THE SQUEEZE

Before the crash, George was like most high schoolers. He never got a full eight hours of sleep, and he occasionally nodded off in class. A busy after-school schedule and demanding academics often kept him up into the wee hours.

Even when George could get to bed earlier, however, he didn't feel tired. And there's a scientific explanation for that: In your teen years, your body's circadian rhythm, or natural clock, shifts. Melatonin, the hormone that makes you drowsy, is released later, making it difficult to fall asleep before 11 p.m. Couple that with the fact that, on average, high school starts at 8 a.m., and it doesn't leave much time for rest. George, for one, had to leave for school by 6:45 a.m.

Watson puts it this way: "Teens are being squeezed on both ends."

MYTHBUSTER- I can catch up on sleep this weekend

Sorry, you can't reverse sleep deprivation by sleeping away your Saturday. After two lengthy snooze sessions, sleep-deprived people were just as spacey as they had been before they tried to catch up, research shows. Sleeping in will also make it harder to fall asleep Sunday night—it's a vicious cycle.

WIRED & TIRED

But George's school isn't entirely to blame. Today, he confesses another reason for his sleep problems: his iPhone. "I always had it in hand," he admits.

If someone asked you if your phone keeps you up too, you'd probably say, "No way." But researchers have found a clear link between your sleep and phone habits. "Today's teens have more distractions than any previous generation," says Kristin Daley, a psychologist who treats sleep problems. "It takes tremendous self-control to ignore those dinging notifications, so you get everything done and get to bed."

And even after you finally close Snapchat, your phone—yep, the one innocently charging on your nightstand—can still ruin your sleep. That's because a screen's glow keeps your brain from releasing melatonin

(the hormone that makes you sleepy). Meanwhile, your body needs shut eye. Sleep allows your cells to repair themselves and your muscles to recuperate. Your brain also processes all the information it collected that day during sleep, so you can learn and remember.

Sleep is especially key for teens: It's when the hormones and chemicals your developing brain needs are released. Skimp on rest and you might struggle to think clearly or keep emotions in check.

QUIET YOUR MIND!

You know the drill: You fall into bed exhausted, but an hour later you're still awake...with your mind whirring. Try one of these expert strategies to stop your racing thoughts.

- Count backward from 100 by threes.
- Think about a cute animal, your favorite sports team, or something else that makes you happy.
- Get out of bed and read something boring in dim light for 10 minutes.
- Take deep breaths.



THE WAKING DEAD

Let's say you're taking a Spanish test when an answer just won't come to you, even though you nailed it on last night's practice quiz (10 sleepless hours ago). Or maybe you miss every free throw during your basketball game—and to top it off, you snap at your teammate on the way to the locker room.

These may seem like unrelated events, but here's the surprising truth: Each may be a direct consequence of your lack of snooze time. In one study, just an hour less of sleep each night made sixth graders perform like fourth-graders on mental tests. Other research shows that sleep loss makes you run slower and miss more shots in sports, while doubling your odds of injury.

Some experts even argue that teens would be less likely to take risks or suffer from anxiety and depression if they could just get enough sleep.

"When you're sleep-deprived and you run into a stressful situation, whether it's with your friends or something else, you're going to get angry and upset," explains Dr. Kathleen Berchelmann, a pediatrician in St. Louis, Missouri. "I see a lot of depression, anxiety, and even suicide attempts in teens who aren't getting enough sleep."

It's stunning to think that by spending more time in bed, you could potentially lift your GPA, get along with your loved ones, excel on the field, and just plain feel happier. But scientists say it's true—many teens are walking around like zombies without even realizing it.

GIVE IT A REST

We get it: With so much on your plate, sleep seems like the easiest thing to sacrifice. But that's a mistake. "You cannot hack your sleep," Watson says. "If you want to be your best version of yourself, sleep is crucial." And the only way to get it is to go totally lights-out for at least eight hours.

George, for his part, says that since his crash, he takes his shuteye seriously. But it can be tricky now that he's living with a roommate in a college dorm.

"Sometimes I just go to sleep while people are hanging out in the room," he says. "My friends say, 'Hey, why are you going to bed so early?' I tell them, 'I need my sleep—and you guys should go to bed too.'" Sound impossible? It's not—keep reading to find the sleep solution that works for you.

