Later school start times may benefit teenagers

By ACSH Staff — August 27, 2014

The new school year is quickly approaching and with it comes early start times for high school students, as well as late bedtimes. But these early start times may not be ideal for these teens. According to Dr. Maida Chen, director of the pediatric sleep disorder center at Seattle Children’s Hospital, their biological clocks are set to fall asleep up to two hours later as they go through puberty, which she ascribes to changes in their circadian rhythms.

The American Academy of Pediatrics issued a policy statement earlier this week recommending a start time of 8:30 a.m. or later for middle and high schools based on this fact and a growing body of research. In one study, Paul Kelley, a sleep researcher at Oxford University, and colleagues analyzed data on sleep patterns of over 150,000 people. Their research, published in the journal Learning, Media and Technology concluded The timing system for sleep in adolescents is involuntary. It’s a system they can’t control and we can’t control and it can’t be trained. In the second study published in the journal Pediatrics, researchers from the University of Minnesota analyzed data such as attendance records, academic performance, mental health, and car-crash rates from 9000 high school students that had school start times ranging from 8 a.m. to 8:55 a.m. Researchers concluded that the later the start time, the greater the benefit.

However, there are numerous hurdles to overcome when considering a later start time including transportation costs, the inconvenience this may cause to parents who are required to be at work early, and pushback from athletics departments because of the changes that would have to be made with sports practices. Yet, even coaches should be open to later start times, as a study published in the Journal of Pediatric Orthopaedics found that among 112 athletes, getting less than eight hours of sleep on average was associated with a 70 percent greater risk of injury.

ACSH’s Elizabeth Whelan had this to say, From an observational standpoint, it’s obvious to see that students are extremely sleepy at the beginning of an early school day. Although there may be competing factors making it difficult for children to get to sleep early, such as after-school activities, homework and distractions from cellphones, it seems that it is worth considering a later start time, should that be possible in the school district.
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