



# Sleep and Your Toddler

## (1 – 3 year olds)

Your child needs enough sleep to grow and develop. Toddlers who have enough sleep are happier the next day.

Parents often worry about their toddler's sleep and expect their toddlers to sleep well.

This handout explains normal toddler sleep and gives you tips that may help you and your child sleep better.



### How do toddlers sleep?

- Toddlers sleep patterns are still developing. They do not mature until the age of 5 years.
- Toddlers have shorter sleep cycles than adults, about 60 minutes long.
- Difficulty going to sleep and night waking are common and normal.
- Some toddlers who slept well before may start waking up again at night. Others who woke up many times at night as babies may start sleeping through the night.
- After 18 months, many toddlers need more help with settling to sleep.
- Regular night waking is less common after age 2.
- Some toddlers may have bad dreams.

### How much sleep does your toddler need in a 24 hour day?

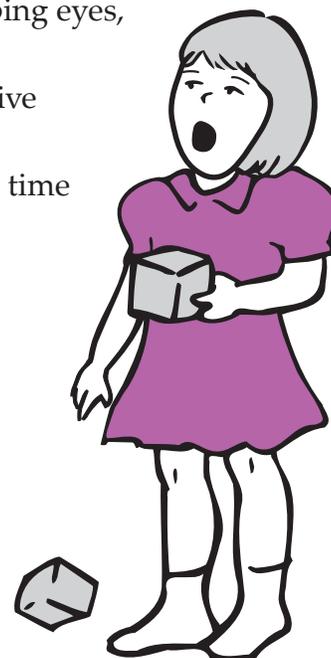
Age in years	Daily range of sleep (in hours)
1	10–16
2–3	10–14

Toddlers may take 1-2 naps during the day. Most sleep will be at night.

Some toddlers need more sleep than others. Watch for tired signs to tell if your toddler is getting enough sleep.

### What are some signs that your toddler is tired?

- Losing interest in people or toys
- Being clumsy, falling or dropping things
- Having less patience, whining, fussing or crying more
- Yawning, rubbing eyes, pulling ears
- Being more active than usual
- Having a hard time waking up in the morning



## What can keep toddlers from sleeping well?

- A toddler may be ill or uncomfortable. For example, colds, asthma, allergies, wet or dirty diaper, hunger or teething.
- Toddlers may not want to be left alone for sleeping.
- Toddlers may be afraid of things, such as the dark, shadows or monsters at night.
- Changes in routine can affect children's sleep. For example, new home, traveling, new sibling or day care
- Toddlers can sense stress in the family, such as illness, conflict or financial worries.
- Busy daytime schedules, missing naps, late or stimulating bedtime routines may make toddlers overtired. This may make it difficult for them to settle to sleep.
- Toddlers may have problems falling asleep if they nap too late in the afternoon or if their bedtimes are too early.
- Toddler's may not yet have learned to fall asleep on their own. Sometimes they are used to being rocked or feed to sleep and need to learn other ways to relax or self comfort.



## What can you do to help your toddler sleep better?

### General tips

- Young children need lots of fresh air and physical activity during the day. Take your toddler outside, for example, to the playground, park or the beach. If it is raining your child may enjoy jumping in puddles or you may go to a play gym or a swimming pool.
- Routines can help toddlers know what to expect. Have regular meal times, activities and nap times during the day. A regular and calm bedtime routine will help your toddler associate these routines with sleep.
- Make sure the bedroom is not too hot or too cold and has enough fresh air. Keep the bedroom quiet and dark. Soothing music, white noise or a nightlight may help some children settle easier.
- A comfort object like a teddy bear or soft blanket may help your child settle at night. An older toddler may want to tell their teddy bear a story or sing songs to the teddy bear to help settle them.

### What can you do to settle your toddler?

- Avoid loud activities before going to bed. For example, playing loudly, watching television or playing computer games.
- Watch for tired signs. Try to get your toddler to bed before your child gets too tired. You may have to move to an earlier bedtime. Tell your toddler that it will be bedtime soon. For example, "After we finish this puzzle, it will be time for bed."

- Have a bedtime routine that is the same every night. For example, put on pajamas, wash face, brush teeth, read a book, sing a song and cuddle. By doing things in the same order your toddler will know what comes next. Allow for some choices. For example, “Which book would you like to read tonight?”
- Set up a bedtime routine that is quiet and calm.
- Talk about what your toddler did during the day. Tell him, “Tomorrow will be another great day”. Some toddlers like to talk a lot. Remind him that it is sleep time now and you will talk more in the morning.
- Help your toddler to fall asleep alone by leaving the bedroom when he is drowsy but still awake. Leave him for a few minutes. If he is unable to settle on his own, return to him and provide brief comfort and leave again. You may stay away a little longer each time before you go back and check on your child.

- It may take some toddlers more time to learn to go to sleep on their own. You may decide to stay beside your toddler at first and let him fall asleep with you being there. Every day move a little further away from him until you are no longer in his bedroom. Your child may want the bedroom door open so he can hear you when you are no longer in the room.



## What can you do about night waking?

- Repeat the last step of the bedtime routine. For example, sing a quiet song, kiss her and say, “It is sleeping time.” Later, you may only call out and reassure her from your bedroom. If she keeps crying, check that she is safe and reassure her.
- Slowly take more time before you respond to your toddler. She may go back to sleep on her own. It can be hard to listen to the crying, but this often works over time.
- You may decide to put a mattress on the floor beside your bed and have your child sleep there if she wakes up at night. If she is old enough, she can go there without waking you up.



## What can parents do to support their family's sleep?

- Follow your instincts! No one approach to sleep will work for every family. Things that can effect what works: your child's personality and how easy they change, your family's physical space, your family culture and values.
- Look after yourself. For example, talk to a friend, go for a walk or do something relaxing.
- Try to catch up with your own sleep. Go to sleep early or sleep when you have someone at home who can help with your toddler.
- If you want to talk more about your toddler's sleep, call the Public Health Nurse at your local unit ([www.vch.ca](http://www.vch.ca))
- More sleep information is available through Toddler's First Steps [www.healthyfamiliesbc.ca](http://www.healthyfamiliesbc.ca) or HealthLink BC-Dial 811. Translation services are available. [www.healthlink.bc.ca](http://www.healthlink.bc.ca)

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**Other fact sheets on parenting your  
child are available at your local Community Health Office/Centre  
or online at <http://vch.eduhealth.ca>**

**For more information, contact a  
Public Health Nurse at Vancouver Coastal Health  
[www.vch.ca](http://www.vch.ca)**

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