Short sleep + long naps = Healthy? [1]

Hi Alice,

I find that I'm most alert late at night, and at school I'll stay up till three or four in the morning. Since I've had morning classes in the past, I've tried to form a habit of going to bed earlier — around midnight or one — but realistically, I don't think this is ever going to happen. I was thinking of trying, when I go back to school this fall, to go to bed around three or four and sleep for four hours, and then also take a four-hour nap during the day. Is this a good solution, or will I be more tired than if I sleep eight hours straight at night? Thanks!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Getting enough z's is something that many folks are worried about! Sleep needs are unique — some folks function best sleeping for a longer period of time once a day, while others sleep multiple times for shorter periods of time. So, it's entirely possible that your proposed plan will help you make it through your day. One thing to consider is how you physically feel. Are you fatigued? Do you navigate through your day feeling tired and drowsy? Because everyone is different when it comes to sleep, one way to determine if you’re getting enough sleep is to notice your level of drowsiness. So, the short answer to your question is that only you can answer if the quantity and quality of sleep you’re getting is enough to keep you functioning throughout your day. For a more complete answer, keep on reading!

When it comes to getting some shut eye, there are actually three different patterns: monophasic, biphasic, and polyphasic. Though monophasic sleeping — sleeping in one continuous block once a day — may be the most common pattern in modern humans, research is still out on whether it's the natural sleep pattern for humans. Why? Research has shown that the biphasic sleep pattern (sleeping twice every 24 hours, similar to your suggested pattern) results in well-rested and high-functioning people. In the context of school, researchers found that students who had a biphasic sleep pattern actually did better on an exam compared to students who had monophasic and polyphasic patterns. What about polyphasic? About 85 percent of mammals are polyphasic sleepers — meaning they sleep in short chunks throughout the day. However, unlike biphasic sleepers, researchers have found that polyphasic sleepers actually experienced poor or inadequate nighttime sleep quality, even if their total amount of sleep fell within an adequate
range.

Although a biphasic sleep pattern can be sufficient, having uninterrupted, regularly scheduled sleep is thought to be the best way to feel rested and energized when the alarm clock rings. But how much of that uninterrupted sleep is needed varies from person to person — most people need between six to ten hours of sleep each day to feel and do their best. However, regular and continuous sleep can be hard to come by with classes, homework, friends, jobs, families, extra-curricular activities, and other commitments. As a result, perhaps you find it difficult to stay awake in class or during other daytime commitments. While naps may not replace getting adequate quality sleep during the night, a short nap can help improve mood, alertness, and performance.

How long should your nap last? Try to nap for no more than 30 minutes so you’re not left feeling groggy after the nap or sleepless during the night. A nap that lasts longer than 30 minutes may increase the likelihood or severity of sleep inertia (a groggy or disoriented feeling from waking up during a deep sleep). While sleep inertia tends to be mild in fairly well-rested individuals (lasting only a few minutes to half an hour), it may be worse for sleep deprived folks. That would rather defeat the whole purpose of a nap!

What else can you do to make the most of your naps? Here are some tips to consider:

- It’s recommended to space the nap as far away from your nighttime sleep as possible so that you are still able to fall asleep at night. Consider napping in the late afternoon around 2 p.m. or 3 p.m., though this may vary depending on your usual bedtime.
- Drinking a cup of coffee just before a short snooze may help optimize alertness since caffeine takes about 20 to 30 minutes to kick in.
- Keep a regular sleep schedule, including when you nap. Unpredictable sleep schedules can result in an effect similar to jet lag, which could affect your overall sleep quality.

In addition to strategizing your nap hours, it might also be helpful to think about how you use your waking hours. Perhaps you can complete some activities more efficiently, avoid procrastination, or even cut back on your commitments to give yourself more time under the covers. You could talk to your academic advisor or a health care professional to find resources or workshops on time management. For more suggestions on optimizing your sleep schedule, consider checking out the Sleep category in the Go Ask Alice! archives.

Ultimately, the sleep schedule that allows you to feel rested and alert throughout all of the activities you need (and want) to do is the best plan for you. However, if you feel the need to adjust your sleep schedule to better fit with social, work, or work obligations, check out Rising early — Is it really beneficial? Rest well!

Alice!

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