

# No Sleep?

## Counting Sheep Before The Big Game

→ By Charles A. Popkin, MD

**Q:** *Dear Dr. Hockey, my 12-year-old is a goalie, and hockey is his life. The night before his games, he gets so excited that he can't fall asleep. I worry that staying up so late and getting very little sleep affects his game performance. How can we help improve sleep quality before big games?"*

– Allie C. (Florida)

**A:** First, it's important to know this is extremely common, especially for developing athletes. A combination of anticipation, excitement, and "pregame jitters" often leads to sleep disruptions, especially among children who are extremely dedicated to their sports. In these young players, their brains often stay "on" even when it's time for them to turn "off."

When the quality or quantity of sleep is reduced, it can impact vital elements of sports performance, including reaction time, ability to focus and emotional state. As a goalie, your son's ability to make split-second decisions, maintain a high level of concentration and remain level-headed throughout the game is critical for success. The good news is that there are several changes you can make to help your son improve his sleep hygiene, and if you are consistent in implementing these changes, you will notice a positive difference in his sleep patterns.

### Here are four key takeaways to help your young player rest up before a big game day:

#### 1. Build A Pregame Evening Routine (and Stick to It!)

Children sleep better with predictable routines. Try to create a calming ritual the night before games: light stretching, a warm shower, a relaxing book (not on a screen!), and lights out at a consistent time. The goal is to cue the body and brain that it's time to power down. I recommend removing phones, tablets, computer screens and televisions at least one hour before bedtime.

#### 2. Limit The Hype Late in The Day

It's natural to want to talk about the big game, but save that for earlier in the day. After dinner, shift conversation away from hockey. Talking about the game right before bedtime can reignite excitement and make it even harder to fall asleep.

#### 3. Focus on Relaxation, Not Sleep Itself

If your kid can't fall asleep right away, don't stress about it—and don't encourage them to stress either. Instead, encourage relaxing breath-



ing exercises, listening to soft music, or even light meditation. Often, simply resting the body quietly (even if awake) can help it transition naturally to sleep.

#### 4. Utilize Sleep Sounds and Sleep Stories

There are many different sounds and noises known to help induce sleep. Thunderstorm sounds, ocean waves, crackling fires, a forest ambiance, and a variety of color noises (particularly brown and white noises) are but a few examples of sounds that promote relaxation and sleep. In addition to sounds, there are many commercially available apps that offer stories that are specifically designed to induce relaxation and sleep. Many of these apps offer free trial periods, so you and your son can sample a variety of sleep-inducing sounds and stories and find the one(s) that work best for him.

**?** If you have questions for Dr. Hockey, please email [Justin.Felisko@usahockey.org](mailto:Justin.Felisko@usahockey.org)

#### Final Thought

Game day jitters are part of what makes hockey exciting! By giving your developing athlete tools to manage their energy and calm their mind, you're not only helping them sleep better—you're helping them build skills that will benefit them throughout their sports career and beyond. Sleep tight—and good luck at the rink! ☆