

Night owl or morning lark? Better rest is in your genes

By Teddi Nicolaus

The early bird gets the worm. Joy comes with the morning. Early to bed, early to rise, makes a person healthy, wealthy and wise.

There are lots of sayings about being an early riser. But almost no one sings the praises of the night owl who toils long after the early birds have called it a night.

Early risers — often called morning larks — can bounce out of bed at the crack of dawn and might even hit the gym before the sun

comes up. Since they're up early, they like to turn in at around 9 p.m., which is just about the time their owl friends rev up.

Like early birds, night owls can accomplish a lot too, but they do it after dark because that's when

they're most alert and awake. President Barack Obama is famously a night owl, as was Winston Churchill and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Still, the world seems to view morning people as go-getters and night owls as less than wise.

"Society sees getting up early as a sign of virtue," says Philip Gehrman, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine. "We have this prejudice against night owls that's really not founded."

Your tendency toward being a morning lark or a night owl isn't necessarily something you can change. Sleep scientists say a person's "chronotype" — shorthand for whether you are a morning lark, night owl or an intermediate — is determined in large part by your genes. Your sleep

patterns are guided by biological "clocks" in your cells. These clocks operate on a 24-hour cycle, called circadian rhythms, and influence how alert or sleepy you feel.

"This cycle of different genes turns on and off in about a 24-hour pattern," Gehrman says. "For some people it's earlier, and for some people it's later. We know the main genes that are involved, but we don't know exactly why a variation in those genes leads to being an owl or a lark."

While genetics plays a big role in your chronotype, many other factors are also at play, such as shift work and your age. Children start out as larks or intermediates, but at puberty their rhythms shift and they become more "owlish," Gehrman says.

"By their mid-20s, most have moved back into the intermediate range, although some will remain lifelong night owls," he says.

If getting up with the sun is your thing, you'll be happy to learn that a growing body of evidence links your chronotype with lower rates of depression and greater well-being.

But if you're hardwired to be a night owl, you're at greater risk for depression, Type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure. Studies suggest these issues are tied to night owls' insufficient sleep and stress from defying their internal body clocks to conform to traditional morning routines.

That being said, should we try to shift our chronotype, or move closer to the middle? Not necessarily, Gehrman says.

"What we think is actually more important is whether you are living in sync with your circadian rhythm," he says.

For better sleep, stick to a schedule

If you've ever flown from east to west across the United States, you might have experienced jet lag.

Jet lag can occur when you zip quickly across multiple time zones but your body's internal clock, or circadian rhythm, is still synced to the time zone where you started. Jet lag is temporary, but it can cause a host of unpleasant issues such as insomnia, sleepiness, anxiety, constipation and irritability.



>> For more tips on healthy sleep, visit www.cdc.gov/sleep

Night owls who try to adhere to morning schedules or morning larks who stay up late on weekends can experience "social jet lag."

"This is a well-known phenomenon," says sleep expert Katherine Sharkey, MD, PhD, an associate professor of medicine, psychiatry and human behavior at Brown University's Warren Alpert Medical School.

According to Sharkey, social jet lag happens when we have different sleep patterns on weekends than on weekdays. This type of sleep pattern confuses your body and brain in much the same way as flying across multiple time zones.

"It's the flipping back and forth and the sleep deprivation that causes problems, because Monday through Friday you're in a different time zone than you are on the weekend," Sharkey adds.

To counter social jet lag, wake up at the same time every day of the week. You can adjust your schedule gradually.

Put your phone in another room at night so you're not tempted to

look at it. Your phone emits blue light, which suppresses the sleep hormone melatonin.

Open the shades as soon as you get up to expose your eyes to sunlight.



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