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Best bedtime for all

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ARE you an early bird or a night owl?



The question may seem trivial, but the time you go to bed can have a major impact on your well-being, according to researchers in the United States.

The scientists have even established a bedtime that should not be exceeded to help preserve your mental health.

Experts and scientists agree: Sleep plays a vital role in physical and mental health.

From concentration and mood to energy levels, diabetes, and even heart health, getting the right amount and quality of sleep helps maintain good health.

A team of researchers from Stanford University support this with a study that establishes an association between late bedtimes and poor mental health.

Each of us has our own chronotype, or biological rhythm.

The question is: should we follow this rhythm in order to stay in good health?

In other words, if you have more energy in the morning, should you go to bed early all the time to get up early, and vice versa for night owls?

That's the question the researchers set out to answer, analysing data from 73,888 adults aged 63.5 years, on average, from the UK Biobank research database.

They were asked to provide information about their sleep, and in particular, about their inclination to sleep at specific times (i.e. their chronotype).

They were also asked to use a wearable activity monitor to track their actual sleep for seven days.

The scientists wanted to see how participants' chronotype aligned with their behaviour.

The scientists note that over 19,000 participants declared themselves to be morning people, while over 6,800 had a late chronotype, with a later timing of behaviour.

But the vast majority, i.e. almost 48,000 participants, were of an "intermediate" chronotype, falling somewhere in the middle.

They also point out that the sleep data collected was coupled with data from medical records concerning the participants' mental health.

Published in the journal *Psychiatry Research*, the results suggest that late bedtimes, regardless of individual preferences, are associated with higher rates of mental and behavioural disorders.

In a news release, the researchers explain that they were surprised to find that “aligning with one’s chronotype was not the best choice for everyone’s mental health”.

Indeed, they realised that, for night owls at least, it’s better not to follow the rhythm they feel would suit them best.

The scientists even tried to disprove this finding, since it seemed so surprising, but to no avail.

“The results were clear -- both morning types and evening types who went to sleep late had higher rates of mental health disorders, including depression and anxiety,” they conclude.

In addition, their findings point to a particularly increased risk of mental health disorders among participants who habitually went to bed late and then got up late.

The latter were 20% to 40% more likely to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder than night owls who got up early, or at least not too late.

To verify their findings, the researchers looked to sleep duration or consistency of sleep timing, but these two criteria failed to explain the differences in mental health observed between participants.

While they are aware that it can be difficult to go against your chronotype, the researchers nevertheless recommend going to bed before 1am to preserve your mental health.

While they do not explain the mechanism behind this association, they do suggest that it may be due to the poor decisions we are more likely to make late at night.

“Many harmful behaviours are more common at night, including suicidal thinking, violent crimes, alcohol and drug use, and overeating,” the study news release reads.

“One theory, known as the ‘mind after midnight’ hypothesis, suggests that neurological and physiological changes late at night can foster impulsivity, negative mood, impaired judgment and more risk-taking.” – AFP Relaxnews