



Night owls and early birds



Are you the kind of person who leaps out of bed early in the morning feeling wide awake and alert? Or do late nights followed by a long lie-in leave you feeling more refreshed and energetic? The time of day when we feel mentally at our best has been studied by those who are interested in something called circadian rhythms. Derived from the Latin word *circa*, meaning 'about', and *diem*, 'day', circadian rhythms work like an internal body clock and regulate our daily cycles of wakefulness and sleepiness.

It is commonly thought that the circadian rhythm of alertness is closely linked to that of body temperature, and more specifically to brain temperature. Both early birds and night owls achieve a body temperature high and low every 24 hours. However, early birds reach their peak body temperature earlier in the day than night owls do. Given that we are most active and alert when our body temperature is at its highest, it stands to reason that morning and evening types are biologically programmed to function more efficiently at different times of the day.

Unfortunately for night owls, normal working hours favour early risers, with those who sleep late often being labelled as lazy or unproductive. Sayings and proverbs passed down through the centuries such as 'The early bird catches the worm' and 'Early to bed and early to rise makes you healthy, wealthy, and wise' support this line of reasoning. Night owls who are forced to wake up early and conform to the typical 9:00 to 5:00 working day may have difficulties falling asleep early enough in the evening, eventually leading to a sleep debt. Their body clock is out of sync with what society dictates their working clock should be. It's not all bad news for nocturnal types, however. Research has also shown that they can concentrate for longer and perform better than early birds after spending the same number of hours asleep.

Not exactly an early riser.

Questions for your partners

- 1 Are you an early bird or a night owl?
How does it affect your lifestyle?
- 2 Should school start later than 8 am?
Why? / Why not?

