Rising early — Is it really beneficial? [1]

Dear Alice,

I am a college student who doesn't have to wake up early every day for school (which is convenient because I love sleeping late). Yet people always say that you should wake up early in the morning, and I have always wondered if there's really any truth to it. Before seriously committing myself to waking up early on a regular basis, I'd like to know why I should. Are there really any health benefits to waking up early? I went online and found contradicting claims on the subject. Also, are there any studies that prove that working in the morning increases productivity/creativity/even chances of success?

Thanks in advance,

bed-bound

Answer

Dear bed-bound,

Benjamin Franklin is quoted as saying "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." But, with only ten percent of people falling into that "early to rise" category, it seems there's more to being healthy, wealthy, and wise than just waking up early. Whereas some early birds may boast about their "morningness" and all the benefits that come with it, there's little scientific evidence to show that the time at which you get out of bed really makes a difference when it comes to overall health or success in life. It's possible, though, that the time you get out of bed will impact your sleep quantity and quality (more on this in a bit). However, if you don't have to get up early and feel better waking up a little later, you might consider sticking with that routine.

One difficulty that evening people (i.e., those who prefer to go to bed later at night and wake up later in the day) may face is a conflict with their sleeping pattern and when they are asked to be at school, work, or other social obligations — which may take place in the morning. This mismatch, called “social jetlag,” causes some people to wake up at times against their internal sleep timing. It can lead to reduced sleep duration and sleep quality during weekdays (or any other day when these social obligations need to be met), and not getting enough sleep has
known negative short- and long-short term health effects [2]. Studies have looked at the relationship between chronotype, or someone’s sleep time preference based on their biological clock, and various measures such as academic performance, motivation, mood, and mental health among adolescents and college students. The findings suggest that the negative effects often associated with evening people were due to sleep deficit and daytime sleepiness associated with social jetlag, not because they’re evening people. Additionally, a study found that both morning and evening people who align their work schedule with their chronotype enjoyed increased sleep duration and quality on workdays. It seems that getting enough restful sleep (at any time), rather than when someone likes to wake up, may assist physical and mental health!

Even though there are currently no proven health benefits to waking up early, doing so may be helpful in other ways. You may be more likely to eat breakfast or make time for being physically active if you get up earlier. Others may find that waking up early in the morning helps them to be more productive, or gives them time for activities such as reading a book, watching the sunrise, or taking up a hobby. Though our bodies’ sleep timing is partly determined by genetics, if you’re looking to amp up your AM productivity, here are a few tips you may consider trying:

- **Take your time adjusting by waking up progressively earlier** by about 15 to 30 minutes every few days. Though circadian rhythms (the biological, physiological, and behavioral processes which help our body determine when to sleep and when to wake) may be difficult to change, you may find light therapy, melatonin [3], or vitamin B12 [4] helpful. Though it won’t be a quick fix, these may help make those early mornings a little less challenging for the night owls out there. A health care provider may be able to give you additional tips on how to shift your sleep tendencies.
- **Avoid sacrificing hours of sleep** for those extra morning hours. Getting a full night’s rest is crucial for physical and mental functioning. If you’re going to dial back your alarm, try to hop into bed earlier, too. If you want to fall asleep by midnight, for instance, start getting your mind and body in bedtime mode an hour beforehand.
- **Refuse to snooze**. Try putting your alarm clock far enough away from your bed so that you have to physically get up to turn it off. Giving up the “just another ten minutes” mentality and beginning your morning as soon as that buzzer goes off may help you maintain your early rising regimen.
- **Stick to your sleep routine** and reward yourself for doing so. If you don’t have any obligations until later in the day, find ways to motivate yourself to get up and fill those early morning hours. Consider taking some time to have a nice breakfast [5] or get your sweat on [6] to start your day off with a little more energy.

If your body is telling you to sleep, in most cases the best plan might be to listen. If you notice that you are sleeping longer than you used to or if your sleep habits are the result of feelings of sadness or despair, you may consider speaking to a mental health care provider. In the end, rising earlier is not proven to make you healthier, wealthier, or wiser, but if it shifts your schedule to allow more time for healthy or productive activities, it may be worth a shot. Good luck!

Alice!
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