

Sleep Cycle

Wake up at the same time every day, says **Caroline Hopkins Legaspi**



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The two keys to a healthy wake-up routine are getting up at a consistent time each day and viewing morning sunlight — both of which tend to come with a regular morning dog walk. So said Mariana Figueiro, who studies light and health at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, US. She's only half kidding.

We spoke with four other sleep and circadian rhythm specialists who all agreed with Figueiro about the importance of these two morning habits. Here are their other recommendations — dog or no dog.

Stay consistent

Assuming you had the flexibility to choose, is there an ideal time to wake up?

Not exactly. As long as you sleep for seven to nine hours each night, there's no "best" time to wake up, said Dr Daniel Barone, associate medical director of the Weill Cornell Center

for Sleep Medicine in the US.

More important is that you stick to the same time, said Dr Katherine Sharkey, an associate professor who studies sleep at the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University, US.

Your body runs on circadian rhythms that regulate not only your sleep-wake cycle but also your metabolism, appetite, hormones, mood, body temperature and cognitive function.

Waking up at a consistent time can help keep these body functions running smoothly, said Helen Burgess of the Sleep and Circadian Research Laboratory at the University of Michigan in the US.

Waking up much later or earlier than you're used to can make you feel drowsy or uncoordinated. In the longer term, researchers have found links between irregular sleep patterns and increased risks of obesity, diabetes, mood disorders, heart disease and cancer.

No weekend breaks

If you feel tired enough to sleep in on weekends, Figueiro said, you're probably not getting enough rest during the week. In these cases, Dr Sharkey suggested sticking to your typical wake-up time and taking a nap later that day. This can help keep your circadian rhythms in sync.

If you feel you absolutely must sleep in, Dr Barone said you can likely get away with an extra hour. Any longer and you might experience drowsiness, digestive issues and trouble focusing, similar to jet lag. (Sleep experts use the term "social jet lag" to refer to the effects of staying up late and sleeping in on weekends.)

Seek out sunlight

As soon as you wake up, open the blinds and switch on the lights. Then, as soon as you can — ideally within an hour, Figueiro said — try to get outside. Viewing any light in the morning, especially sunlight, helps

signal to your body that it's daytime, Dr Sharkey said.

When the light hits your eyes, it triggers a pathway between your brain and your adrenal glands that tells your body to release cortisol. This hormone makes you feel alert, which in turn could boost your mood, she added.

Some limited studies suggest that viewing morning sunlight can improve your sleep the following night, too. When the sun hits your eyes, Dr Sharkey said, it triggers a metaphorical stopwatch, which begins the countdown to bedtime, later telling your body when to release the sleep hormone melatonin.

Even on overcast days, morning sunlight is strong enough to regulate your body clock, Dr Barone said. But if you wake up when it's still dark, he said it can be useful to turn on a powerful artificial light such as a light box. You might also try waking up to a sunrise alarm clock, he said, which gradually becomes

brighter to mimic the rising sun.

There's no specific amount of time you must spend in the morning sunlight, experts said, but, more exposure is better (as long as you remember to protect your skin). Burgess said an hour is best, but even 15 minutes is better than nothing.

Skip the snooze button

Snoozing your alarm may feel like a gift to yourself, but it isn't the best way to start your day, said Ann E. Rogers, a sleep researcher and professor of nursing at Emory University in the US.

The urge to snooze is your body's way of saying you need more sleep, Dr Sharkey said. And if you have the flexibility in your schedule to hit snooze, the experts agreed you're better off setting your alarm for the later end of your snooze window and getting up then. That way, your body can get the extra rest it craves — uninterrupted.

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