A fact sheet about

A late body clock

Understanding Zoe

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Understanding Zoe

A late body clock

Why your body clock may run late, and how to plan your day around it.



Key points

- Your body has an inner clock, called the body clock or circadian rhythm (definition below). It sets when you feel sleepy and when you feel alert.
- Some people's clocks run early and some run late. Your own timing is called your chronotype.
- A body clock that runs late is common in ADHD adults and in some autistic adults, and other neurodivergent people may find this too. It is a difference in timing, not laziness.
- What may help most is building your day around your own clock where you can, and asking for changes at work. Light can move your clock a little, if you choose to.

What the body clock is

At three in the afternoon you could lie down on the floor, but at eleven at night you are wide awake and finally thinking clearly. You go to bed on time, lie awake for hours, and the alarm at seven feels like the middle of the night.

Maybe people have called you lazy for finding mornings hard, or you have said it to yourself. But a late body clock is about when your body is ready for sleep, not about how hard you try.

The body clock is a timer inside your body that runs on a cycle of about a day. It tells you when to feel alert and when to feel sleepy. In the evening it tells your body to make melatonin, a hormone that helps tell your body it is night.

The clock is set each day, mostly by light. Light in the morning tends to move it earlier, and bright light late in the evening may push it later.

Your chronotype is the time your body would choose to sleep and wake if nothing else got in the way. Some people are early birds and some are night owls. Both are normal ways for a body to be.

Why your clock may run later than other people's

Experts in adult ADHD say that most ADHD adults have a body clock that runs late, so they fall asleep late. In one study, ADHD adults who found it hard to fall asleep made melatonin later at night than other adults. They also went to sleep later and woke up later.

In an Australian study, a late body clock was more common in autistic adults than in other adults.

Work, worry and low mood also shaped how people slept, so the clock is not the only reason. If you are neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise this too.

The idea of a "normal" time to sleep and wake, and a day that starts at nine, was built around how most people's bodies work (e.g. neuronorms). It leaves out many neurodivergent people. So a late clock is not you getting sleep wrong.

If your clock runs late, going to bed at ten can feel like trying to sleep in the middle of the afternoon. Lying there and trying harder does not change the time on the clock. So finding it hard to sleep early or get up early is not about effort or willpower.

More broadly, research on autism, ADHD and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: build your day around your clock

Your clock is not something to fix. Start by noticing it: for a week or two, notice when you feel sleepy and when you feel most awake, especially on days with nothing planned. That is the closest view of your own rhythm.

Then change one thing in your week to fit it. Some ideas to choose from:

- a later bedtime and a later start, on the days you can choose
- the tasks that need the most focus at the time of day you feel most awake
- nothing booked early in the morning, where you have a say
- your evening kept clear, so a late clock is not squeezed by a fixed bedtime

You can keep a note by typing or talking in the Understanding Zoe app of when you felt sleepy and alert, so your rhythm is easier to see.

This step is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

Asking for changes at work

Your clock can be a reason to ask for a change at work, like a later start, flexible hours or working from home on some days. A change like this is often called a workplace adjustment, and many cost nothing. What you share about why is your choice.

In Australia, employees with disabilities can ask for flexible working arrangements, such as changes to their hours. This usually applies once you have worked for the same employer for at least 12 months. JobAccess gives free, confidential advice about workplace adjustments.

If you want or need to move your clock

Some parts of life cannot move, like a set shift, school drop-off or caring for someone. If you want to move your clock a little to fit them, light is the main thing that can shift it:

- get daylight within an hour of waking, for half an hour if you can
- keep the lights low in the last hours of the evening, and screens a bit further from your face

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether this happens every night or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help with sleep and with how your day is set up, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

If you take any medicine, or you are thinking about melatonin or a light box, talk to your GP first.

Sources

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UnderstandingZoe

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

for more information, you can contact

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