



day breakers

Want a piece of early-bird action? **Carmel Sparke** finds nocturnal creatures can learn to greet the morning sun.

Yogis, babies and my husband all have one trait in common. They are among those much-envied creatures: the early risers.

These blessed ones wake cheerful, alert and ready to greet the dawn, rather than cursing, groggy and hitting the snooze button like the rest of us. They're not only gifted at getting to work on time, but research suggests they also enjoy better wellbeing and mental health, and could even earn more money than late risers.

So what if you're a nocturnal creature but you'd like a piece of

this lark action? Is it possible to make the shift? Sleep researcher Dr Elise Facer-Childs from Monash University says yes, at least in extreme night owls. She's just finished a study to see whether a small group in their early 20s, all of whom usually went to bed at about 2.30am, could shift their body clocks by changing their routine.

They were asked to rise two hours earlier than normal, go to bed two hours sooner, eat their evening meal by 7pm, exercise in the mornings rather than evenings, and to maintain the new pattern, even on weekends.

After three weeks, the researchers found that those who had stuck to the program had shifted their body clocks by about two hours, with positive effects on their mental health and morning performance.

"We were delighted to see that these kinds of lifestyle interventions can work, and we were able to give these night owls some simple tools to wake up earlier," says Facer-Childs.

It's recognised that some people naturally thrive in the mornings and others shine in the evenings. Facer-Childs says an estimated 35 per cent of us have night owl tendencies, between 10 and 15 per cent are early birds, and the rest of us lie somewhere in between.

The differing behavioural and sleeping patterns of morning and night people is partly due to physiology. We all have variations in our body clocks, which affect everything from appetite to mood and body temperature, as well as waking and sleeping times.

Furthermore, the levels of melatonin, the hormone that tells our bodies when to sleep, start to rise in the morning person earlier in the evenings compared to those of a night owl.

Light also has a huge influence on our body's internal clock. When morning sunlight hits the back of the retina, sensors tell the brain it's time to switch off the melatonin. At night, lower light is a signal to release melatonin and prepare for sleep.

Tackling both ends of the body clock, in the morning and evening, is key to changing sleep patterns, explains sleep physician Dr Keith Wong, of the Woolcock Institute of Medical Research in Sydney.

Wong advises patients who wish to become early risers to start by setting the alarm 15 or 30 minutes earlier.

"It's about gradually shifting that wake-up time, being exposed to morning light and then trying to make conditions right at the other end of the day," he says.

Wong advises patients who wish to become early risers to start by setting the alarm 15 or 30 minutes earlier every couple of days and then, if possible, to go outdoors and walk for half an hour without sunglasses. "You want the morning light to hit the back of the retina," he says.

After that, stay as active as you can so you're tired at the end of the day and resist the urge to nap. In the evenings, avoid the bright lights and screens that can suppress melatonin and push the body clock back. "Think about ambient light in the room and go to bed when you're sleepy, hopefully a bit earlier than usual," Wong says.

Being consistent with the new wake-up times is vital but it can become a bit of a slog while you're making the shift – and it also means saying goodbye to those weekend sleep-ins. However, if you want to join those lucky morning masters, you have to stick at it.

As Wong puts it: "It does work, there's physiology behind it. But it's a matter of incorporating it into your routine and just doing it."



MY DAY ON A PLATE

Libby Babet

Businesswoman, 37

4.30am I teach a fitness class at 5.45am, so I opt for one of my own Beauty Food snack products (nut butter and collagen protein), a banana and a black coffee.

8am A smoothie with vegan protein powder, greens powder, unsweetened almond milk, half a cup of frozen organic blueberries and a teaspoon of peanut butter.

10.30am Two slices of grainy sourdough toast with avo, olive oil and lime juice, plus a few steamed eggs.

3pm I cook some chopped vegies (broccoli, asparagus, cauliflower, spinach) in a pan with butter, pop them on some microwavable rice and add tahini.

5pm A cup of green tea and some dark chocolate.

8pm Home-made pizza using flat bread, tomato paste and olive oil. Toppings are zucchini, carrot, pumpkin, broccolini, sliced tomato and mozzarella cheese.

Dr Joanna McMillan says ...

Top marks for ... Being a master of throwing together a quick, nutritious meal. Microwavable rice packets are ideal, as they often include quinoa and other wholegrains in the mix. Adding plenty of vegies to this rice dish, as well as to your dinner pizza, gives you a fabulous nutrient hit.

If you keep eating like this you'll ... Have to be careful about meeting your iron requirements. If you always follow a vegetarian diet, your absorption of iron will be low, meaning you will need to consume more than in a diet that includes red meat. If your iron levels fall too low, you will feel tired, be unable to maintain your exercise regime and be more susceptible to colds and flu.

Why don't you try ... Adding tofu to your rice dish, oats or wholegrain breakfast cereal to your smoothie, eating leafy greens every day and including quinoa, teff, beans or lentils several times a week. These foods are all good plant sources of iron.

Libby Babet is co-founder of Nurture Her, which holds its next retreat in Fiji, October 18-22.