

Why Adolescents Fall Asleep Too Late

Falling asleep late is common in adolescence. But a similar complaint can arise from quite different processes, and distinguishing them may change what to try next.

A delayed body clock

- Sleep timing tends to shift later through puberty, with sleep pressure building more slowly in the evening
- Sleep is often reasonably sound once it begins
- The difficulty tends to be more with waking than falling asleep
- With a freer schedule, sleep may settle — though still late

An insomnia process

- Difficulty falling asleep tends to persist across different bedtimes
- Worry, effortful trying and pre-sleep arousal appear to play a larger role
- Bed may become associated with being awake
- A freer schedule often makes less difference

Where they overlap



These are not clean categories. Lying awake night after night because of a delayed clock may itself generate the worry and arousal associated with insomnia, and many young people seem to present with features of both.

One question worth asking



Ask what happens during school holidays, when bedtime and waking are unconstrained. Sleep that settles but stays late may point more towards timing; difficulty sleeping that persists may suggest something else is maintaining it.

Approaches that help with insomnia may do little to shift a delayed clock, and advice aimed at timing may not settle a racing mind. Taking time to explore which processes are involved seems to make brief, low-intensity approaches more likely to help.



Join Professor Michael Gradisar for an evidence-based webinar on assessing adolescent sleep problems and applying brief interventions in routine practice.

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