

DO SLEEP HABITS HELP TO MARK THE END OF ADOLESCENCE?

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Research conducted by Dr. Till Roenneberg (*Current Biology*, Vol. 14, Issue 24, December, 2004) proposes that a change in the timing of sleep may be the first biological marker of the end of adolescence.

Dr. Roenneberg asked 25,000 people between ages of eight and 90 about their sleep and wake times.

He found that children go to bed early and wake up early, but that sleep and waking times become progressively later during development until around age 20, when the pattern suddenly reverses and people start to go to bed earlier and wake up earlier. He notes that although there's agreement among researchers about the biological markers that puberty has ended — a cessation of bone growth at around 16 for girls and 17 ½ for boys — the end of adolescence has been tougher to pinpoint, with its complex mixture of physical, psychological, social, and mental changes.

It's clear to most parents that teens' bodies are built to stay up late into the night and sleep in the morning. What's less clear is why teens stay up so late. Sleep may seem less important to teenagers than text messaging or studying or playing on the computer, but no one is sure whether they stay up late because they are busy or if they keep themselves busy because they simply can't sleep. Dr. Roenneberg's work suggests that biological influences play a role.

Other research has found that teens have higher levels of the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin during the morning than children or adults do. In any event, some school systems, recognizing the reality of teen-aged sleep, are adapting the start times of high school classes. Although most high school classes still start at around 8:00, more are moving their starting times later, or at least giving students some flexibility in their schedules to make later starts possible. □



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