



Tips for Coping with Jet Lag

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A flight from Singapore brings you to New York City. The warm rays of the afternoon sun above Times Square beckon you towards Broadway, yet you crave the bed in your hotel room. Day lies in front of you, yet your body believes it is night. This phenomenon is known as jet lag, where your internal body clock is out of sync with the local time after jet travel across two or more time zones.

The Circadian Rhythm

Many of our body's physiological processes, such as the sleep-wake cycle and hormone secretion, are controlled by a central body "master clock" in the brain, which gives rise to the circadian (meaning "about a day") rhythm.

While your body prefers to keep a regular rhythm, external factors can advance or delay it. Some common external disruptors of your circadian rhythm include changes in light or temperature, as well as certain types of food, medication, exercise, and even social activities.

Disorders of the circadian rhythm may lead to symptoms of insomnia, poor concentration and fatigue. In contrast, proper maintenance of our circadian health facilitates restful sleep and promotes good physical and mental health.

Optimise Your Circadian Health

Want to keep your circadian rhythm running smooth? Try to maintain regular sleep and wake times, both on weekdays and weekends. This includes having sufficient time to wind down and rest your mind and body before bedtime.

To help your body prepare for more restful sleep, avoid exposure to light, including those from electronic devices, close to bedtime. You should also avoid alcohol and stimulating substances such as cigarettes and caffeine near bedtime.

While a regular exercise routine can do wonders for conditioning a healthy body and mind, intense workouts in the evening may have a counterproductive effect on your sleep. If your goal is to improve your circadian health, avoid exercising too close to bedtime.

What is Jet Lag and How it Happens

After a long travel across half the globe, jet lag is often unavoidable. The degree of jet lag depends on the number of time zones crossed, the direction of travel, and one's ability to tolerate circadian misalignment.

The individual ability to adapt to changes in time zone varies, but generally worsens with age. Our bodies are typically able to delay the circadian rhythm by about 1.5 hours a day on westward flights (e.g. from Singapore to London or Paris) and advance 1 hour a day on eastward flights (e.g. from Singapore to Sydney or San Francisco).

Interestingly, westward travel is better tolerated than eastward travel due to the fact that our circadian rhythm tends to run slightly longer than 24 hours, making it easier to delay our circadian clocks (i.e. delaying our sleep time to suit the new time zone) which is needed after westward travel.



Tips for Dealing with Jet Lag

Body Clock

Before traveling, start adjusting your body clock by sleeping and waking up earlier or later, in line with the time zone of your planned destination. This can usually be done up to three days in advance of your trip.

Sleep

Try to get some sleep while on the flight to avoid sleep loss. If possible, try to get some sleep during the hours corresponding to night time at your destination.

H₂O

Make it a point to stay hydrated during flight. Drink more water and avoid alcohol, which can dehydrate you.

Caffeine

Caffeine has a stimulating effect and can be taken strategically to keep awake when you have arrived at your destination, but try to avoid using it too close to sleep time as this may further disrupt your circadian rhythm. As a precaution, avoid caffeine within five hours of bedtime.

Natural Light

Exposure to natural light can also impact your circadian rhythm. Where possible, seek morning light when travelling westwards and evening light when travelling eastwards.

Supplements

The use of melatonin may be helpful. You may wish to consult your doctor for more information regarding suitable dosage amounts for your own personal needs.

These are general guidelines. The treatment for jet lag disorder requires tailoring according to the number of time zones crossed, direction of travel, and several other factors. Do seek help from a sleep clinic doctor if you require further advice.

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