

## Sleep: The 5 best ways to combat jet lag, according to experts

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### Health



(Photo source: freepik)

**Feeling tired and disoriented after a long **journey** ? Learn the best tips to deal with jet lag and enjoy your trip from the start.**

Nothing ruins a trip more than spending the first few days tired and jet lagged. Even worse is when you return home after long hours of flying.

**You are probably well aware of the symptoms of jet lag:**

- fatigue,
- sleep disorders and
- general bad mood.

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But why is this happening? **Jet lag occurs when there is a mismatch between your biological clock and the time at your destination. Our biological clock regulates our habits, the time we sleep and wake up or the time we eat each day. So when we abruptly change time zones, our bodies get confused with the new schedule and environment.** As it adjusts, everything from your sleep cycle to digestion can seem out of control.

To some extent, jet lag is inevitable during long-haul travel. However, **experts say it's possible to minimize its effects so you can enjoy your trip to the fullest and return home without a hitch .**

### **The 5 best ways to deal with jet lag**

- Change your bedtime before traveling
- Make the most of your first day
- Also adjust your meal times
- Exercise for energy
- Be very careful with sleeping pills

### **Change your bedtime before traveling**

If you're facing a time difference of just a few hours, you can prepare ahead of time, says **Dr. Sairam Parthasarathy**, director of the Center for Sleep, Circadian and Neuroscience Research at the University of Arizona Health Sciences.

Starting about three days before you travel, adjust your bedtime by 30 minutes earlier each night, Parthasarathy recommends. Going to bed progressively earlier will prepare your body to start tiring at a normal bedtime at your destination.

If necessary, you can also take a small dose of melatonin just before your desired bedtime. And, on the day you arrive at your destination, try to avoid exposure to bright light at night, which can keep you awake longer, says Parthasarathy.

Before traveling by plane, reverse these instructions. Go to bed progressively later in the days before your flight, and once you land, try to get exposure to light in the afternoon and evening to delay the

## **Make the most of your first day**

If you cross multiple time zones, you might get off the plane like a "zombie", ready for bed before noon. There's only a little you can do to prepare in advance for such a dramatic time difference, but what you do when you arrive matters, says **Dr. Alon Avidan**, director of the Sleep Disorders Center at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Light exposure is the strongest regulator of circadian rhythms. So if you arrive at your destination in the morning, try to avoid direct sunlight until the early afternoon. (This means wearing sunglasses if you're going outside). After crossing multiple time zones, your "circadian clock can mistakenly mistake morning light for evening sunset," causing confusion, Avidan explains. Each day of your trip, you can start seeing the morning sun gradually earlier.

And, even if you're exhausted, resist the temptation to go to your hotel and fall into a deep sleep in the middle of the day. This is "the last thing we want people to do," says Avidan, because it prolongs the discrepancy between your internal and external time. If you need a nap to get you through the day, your nap shouldn't last longer than 20 minutes, ideally no later than 2 a.m., suggests Avidan. Otherwise there is a risk of ruining your night's sleep.

Caffeine can be used in a similar way, says the expert. A coffee or two can help you get through the day, but don't drink it so late that you can't sleep at night.

## **Change your meal times too**

In addition to exposure to sunlight, factors such as diet, physical activity and social interaction also affect circadian rhythms, according to Parthasarathy. So think twice before consuming an airplane meal at 3am at your destination time. Your brain says "*Wait a second, what meal is this?*," explains Parthasarathy.

If you can wait, it's best to eat at a regular time at your destination. (Of course, if you're on a long-haul flight, don't starve yourself for hours, says Avidan).

You may also need to avoid in-flight cocktails, especially if you're trying to get a good night's sleep on the plane. Alcohol disrupts sleep, often causing early awakening when blood alcohol levels drop, Avidan explains. If you really want to enjoy your vacation, try to limit yourself to one drink.

## Exercise for more energy

You might want to spend the first day of your vacation relaxing in your comfortable hotel bed, but it's best to get up and get moving, says Emily **Schmitt**, who directs the Circadian Rhythm and Exercise Research Lab at the University of Wyoming.

On your first morning in a new time zone, spend 20 minutes exercising, she suggests. "It doesn't have to be a sprint or a hard CrossFit workout," she says. "*It could just be a walk to your local coffee shop.*" Anything that gets you out of bed in the morning will help your body rejuvenate and adjust to its new environment, he says. It can also help your digestion return to normal.

Light physical activity, like walking, can also be a helpful tool if you find yourself going to bed early at night because of the time difference, says Schmitt. Movement increases alertness, so it can be a useful way to delay sleep until bedtime.

## Be very careful with sleeping pills

Parthasarathy reports that his patients sometimes try to use sleeping pills to ensure as much rest as possible on their long flights. However, this strategy can be counterproductive, he warns.

Medications combined with fatigue from the transatlantic flight can lead to severe drowsiness, confusion and disorientation upon awakening. Be very careful if you choose to take medication while traveling, especially if it's not something you use regularly, says Parthasarathy.

## Alternative solutions

If all of this seems complicated, use your cell phone. There are many time zone calculators, such as British Airways and Timeshifter, that tell you exactly how to prepare for a transatlantic trip based on your flight details.



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