



WHAT IS JET LAG?

Long journeys can be exhausting and to make matters worse, when you arrive at a destination your body clock can be out of step with the new timings of daylight and darkness.

Jet lag is an example of a Circadian Rhythm Disorder, whereby your sleep is out of sync with your body clock.



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Jet Lag

Circadian Rhythm Disorder



WHY DO WE GET JET LAG?

We all have an internal body clock, or circadian rhythm, which controls when we feel sleepy and when we feel active.

The clock is governed by daylight - so we get used to a regular rhythm of daylight and darkness. The world is divided into 24 time zones and travelling to a different time zone means your body clock will be out of sync with local time.

You may get symptoms of jet lag if you cross three or more time zones. This means that if you fly from Australia to New Zealand or China, you probably won't be as affected. Most people will have some symptoms travelling from Australia to USA, or Europe to Australia.

Jet lag tends to be more of a problem if you are flying east because your body finds it harder to adjust to a shorter day than a longer one e.g. if you fly from London back to Australia and you have already adjusted to the London time zone, your body clock will think it is the middle of the day at bedtime and find it more difficult to fall asleep.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF JET LAG?

The symptoms of jet lag are different for everyone. They depend on how many time zones you have crossed and in which direction you have travelled. Jet lag disturbs your sleep, usually making you feel tired and low in energy during the day. Symptoms may include:

- Have trouble getting to sleep
- Wake up often at night or awaken early in the morning
- Have difficulty concentrating
- Be a bit clumsy or irritable because you are so tired
- Indigestion or a low appetite
- Feel generally unwell and out of sorts

HOW LONG DOES JET LAG LAST?

The severity duration of your symptoms will generally depend on the number of time zones you cross in your flight. You may start to feel better in a couple of days but if you have travelled a very long distance it can take up to 14 days to feel better. Different body rhythms adjust at different rates. For example, you might feel your digestion has recovered but still have trouble sleeping.

WHAT CAN I DO TO MINIMISE JET LAG?

There are a few things that can make jet lag worse:

- **Tiredness** - be well rested before your flight and rest during the flight
- **Alcohol** - may help you nod off but it impairs the quality of sleep and having a hangover can make jet lag feel worse. If you drink any alcohol before or during your flight, make sure it is just a small amount
- **Caffeine** - can disrupt sleep too. Stick to the amounts you normally drink and do not drink caffeine within a few hours of when you plan to go to sleep

HELP YOUR BODY CLOCK ADJUST

If you are staying at your destination for more than a few days, it is worth helping your body adjust to the new time zone.

It may help to begin shifting your internal clock before you leave. Try getting up earlier and as you get more tired at night, going to bed earlier if you are flying east, or going to bed later for a few nights if you are flying west.

Keep your watch on your home time until you arrive at your destination. This will help you recognise how and why you are feeling jetlagged. If you arrive in the evening, sleep early on the flight, then stay awake so you can go to bed when you arrive. If your flight arrives in the morning, sleep as much as you can so you can stay awake through the day.

Natural light can help your body clock adjust. When you arrive, try to get into the local routine immediately and spend the day outdoors.

Travelling West: seek exposure to bright light in the evening.

Travelling East: seek exposure to bright light in the morning.

When travelling for business, it may be helpful to arrange important meetings to coincide with daytime at home.

If you are only staying a few days, your body may not have time to adjust to local time. Sometimes it is best just to stick to your usual home timings. If you are not sure, ask your GP who may be able to advise you or refer you to a travel medicine expert.

TREATMENTS FOR JET LAG

There are limited medicines specifically available for jet lag. However, there is evidence to suggest that the hormone melatonin can be useful in people who are travelling across more than five time zones. Melatonin is only effective for eastward destinations. Melatonin has not been licensed yet for jet lag, but if your GP has experience in this area, he or she may be able to prescribe it to you. The timing is important so it is best to get advice from a sleep specialist to help with your scheduling of melatonin. If you take it at the wrong time, your body clock may think it is going in the opposite direction! Never drive after taking melatonin as it works as a hypnotic.

If you are tired when you need to be alert, caffeine can help as a temporary pick-up. But do not drink lots of coffee in the hours before you need to get to sleep.

Bon Voyage!

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