

Travel and Sleep: How to Manage Jet Lag When Flying East or West

Why Travel Disrupts Sleep

When you travel across time zones, your body's internal clock (circadian rhythm) falls out of sync with the local day and night cycle. This leads to jet lag—fatigue, poor concentration, digestive issues, early waking, or difficulty falling asleep.

Flying West vs. Flying East

Flying west makes the day longer, which is generally easier to adjust to. Flying east shortens the day and requires your body clock to move forward—something that's harder to do. Most people can adjust by about one hour per day.

Light Exposure and Melatonin Timing

When flying east: Try to advance your body clock. Get morning sunlight and avoid bright evening light. Taking melatonin (0.5–3 mg) about 2–3 hours before your new bedtime may help.

When flying west: Delay your body clock. Seek evening light and avoid early morning light. Melatonin is often unnecessary, but if used, take it later in the evening.

Practical Strategies Before and During Travel

- Adjust sleep time by 1 hour per day before your trip.
- Stay hydrated; avoid alcohol and heavy meals before bed.
- Use eye masks or blackout curtains and maintain consistent wake times.
- Short naps (<30 min) can help early in the trip.
- Blue-light-blocking glasses at night can assist when shifting your clock forward.

Other Helpful Tips

Keep meal timing and exercise consistent with your destination. Limit caffeine to the morning. For short trips (under 3 days), sometimes it's easier to stay on your home time zone.

Summary by Direction of Travel

If you're traveling east (to an earlier time zone):

- Your goal is to fall asleep and wake up earlier.
- Get bright light exposure in the morning at your destination.
- Avoid evening light and screens.
- Take melatonin (0.5–3 mg) about 2–3 hours before your new local bedtime.
- Limit caffeine after noon.

If you're traveling west (to a later time zone):

- Your goal is to stay awake later and sleep in.
- Seek bright light in the evening at your destination.
- Avoid early morning bright light.
- Melatonin is usually not necessary, but if used, take it later in the evening.
- Early morning light may worsen jet lag.

Key Takeaway: You can't eliminate jet lag completely, but timing your light exposure, melatonin, meals, and sleep can shorten recovery by several days and help your body adapt more smoothly to new time zones.

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