

Jet Lag and How to Deal With It

If you're like a lot of other folks, you'll be taking a vacation this summer. And if your trip takes you across a number of time zones, you'll have to cope with jet lag.

Jet lag is your body's physical response to an abrupt change in time zones. It is a 20th century disorder, made possible by the advent of jet travel. Here's why it develops: the human body has built-in natural rhythms that regulate hunger, sleep, and other bodily functions. These rhythms are cued by a 24-hour cycle of environmental stimuli, especially daylight. When we travel across time zones, the cues occur at different times than the body is used to. It usually takes one day for every time zone crossed for the body to adjust to the new cues. Until your body catches up with the new time zone's cues, you are in a state of jet lag and may suffer some of these symptoms:

- Inability to sleep at night (insomnia)
- Urge to sleep at inappropriate times
- General lethargy and fatigue lasting days after the trip
- Difficulty concentrating
- Slowed reflexes
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Irritability

Some symptoms of jet lag could also be exaggerated by the physiological consequences of flying. For example, the low air pressure within modern aircraft provides less oxygen than most people are used to, which causes fatigue. This effect is worse for smokers and for people with heart or lung problems.

Another consequence of flying is dehydration due to the dry air continuously recirculated through the aircraft's cabin. When you're dehydrated, your blood thickens and cannot travel around your body as easily as normal. Dehydration also dries out the tissues of your mouth, throat, and nose, which increases your susceptibility to airborne infections.

The lack of activity inherent in jet travel can also be a problem. Many travelers suffer from swollen feet and ankles promoted by inactivity.

Just how much you'll suffer from jet lag is determined by a number of factors. The more time zones crossed, the more severe the symptoms. Because it's easier for the body to delay sleep than advance it, traveling east usually results in a more difficult adjustment than traveling west.

Traveling north-south within the same time zone doesn't cause jet lag, although, depending on the length of the trip, you might have some of the physiological consequences of flying such as swollen feet, dehydration, and fatigue. Susceptibility to jet lag generally increases with age. In fact, babies and small children are rarely affected by it.

Minimize your jet lag

Nearly all long-haul travelers will experience some degree of jet lag. Here's what you can do to minimize its impact on you:

1. If possible, book your trip to include a stopover, especially if traveling eastward. Try to arrive late in the day so it will be time to sleep.
2. Prepare your body for jet lag several days, or even weeks, in advance. Try going to sleep earlier, beginning a week or two before departure.
3. Get plenty of exercise before you leave and when you arrive. This will improve your body's circulation of oxygenated blood, which minimizes or even eliminates many jet lag symptoms.
4. Drink plenty of water, at least eight 12- ounce glasses every day, both before and during the journey. Avoid caffeine as it contributes to dehydration and disturbed sleep patterns.
5. While in transit, change your watch to your destination time zone. Sleep on the plane if it is bedtime at your destination; stay awake if it isn't.
6. If you are going to sleep on the plane, make yourself comfortable. Use such aids as a blindfold, ear plugs, a supportive neck pillow, and a blanket.
7. If it's daytime on arrival, spend some time outside without sunglasses, if possible. Some studies indicate that this helps travelers adjust faster to a new time zone.
8. Shower upon arrival, and, if possible, during extended stopovers. A shower not only freshens you up, but also stimulates circulation and counteracts the drying effect the dry cabin atmosphere has on your skin.

9. Adjust your schedule to the new time zone's eating and sleeping times as soon as you arrive. Resist the urge to take a nap before a reasonable bedtime in the new time zone.

Minimize the physiological effects of flying

These are things that you can do to help yourself avoid some of the physiological consequences of flying, which might make you better able to deal with jet lag.

1. Elevate your feet whenever possible during the flight to minimize foot and ankle swelling.
2. Stimulate your circulation during the journey. Do stretching exercises in your seat. Take periodic walks up and down the aisle. During stopovers, get off the plane and take a walk through the airport, if possible.
3. Moisturize your skin with lotion during the flight. Use eye drops to lubricate your eyes, especially if you wear contact lenses.

Jet lag is also influenced by your attitude toward it. The more negatively you characterize it, the worse it will be. Having a positive attitude toward jet lag can actually help reduce your symptoms.