SLEEP & STRESS

What Actually Helps Jet Lag Pass Faster

Light can shift your body clock, while melatonin may help sleep-but the evidence does not support every popular jet-lag remedy.

Your body has not landed yet

You have arrived, but your sleep is still somewhere over the ocean. You are wide awake when the room goes dark, heavy-eyed when everyone else starts the day, and unsure whether to seek sunlight, swallow melatonin or simply wait. Jet lag turns a straightforward trip into an argument between local time and your body.

That argument begins when rapid travel carries you across at least two time zones. Your internal circadian clock cycles about every 24 hours and tries to align sleep and waking with signals such as light, darkness, meals and physical activity. After travel, that clock can remain aligned with the place you left rather than the place where you are.

The result is not only a badly timed bedtime. You may feel sleepy or alert at the wrong part of the day, while circadian disruption more generally can reduce alertness and make memory and decision-making harder. Poor-quality sleep can also affect thinking, physical and mental health, and ordinary daily functioning.

Jet lag is usually temporary, but direction matters: it is often more severe after eastward travel than after westward travel. The useful question, then, is not which trick makes you unconscious tonight. It is which intervention helps move your sleep-wake rhythm towards local time.

Light does the clock-moving work

Of all the environmental cues competing for your internal clock's attention, light is the strongest. That makes light management the clearest non-drug strategy in the available guidance. The aim is not merely to make a hotel room feel pleasant. It is to use brightness and darkness to tell your body when its day now begins and ends.

The direction of travel changes how bright-light therapy is used. Morning light can move sleep and waking earlier and may be used for jet lag after eastward travel. Light later in the day can move them later and may be used after westward travel. This is why generic advice to "get lots of sunshine" misses the crucial point: light can send different timing signals depending on

when you receive it.

A light box produces bright light similar to sunlight; light glasses and visors may also be effective. But light therapy is not harmless simply because it involves no medicine. Reported side effects include eye strain, headaches, migraines, nausea and agitation. If you have an eye condition or take medicine that increases light sensitivity, ask your doctor before using it.

Artificial light at night can also work against the new bedtime by lowering melatonin levels and making sleep harder. Less light from televisions and electronic devices, dimmer lighting before bed, and a cool, quiet sleeping place all support the same message. Brightness helps set the day. Darkness protects the night.

Producing sleep is still not the same thing as resetting the clock.

Melatonin helps sleep, with caveats

Melatonin sounds like a direct answer because it is connected to the body's sleep-wake timing. Supplements are laboratory-made versions of the sleep hormone, and doctors may recommend melatonin for some circadian rhythm disorders. Yet the evidence supplied here does not establish exactly how much melatonin shortens jet lag, or by how many days.

A 2022 systematic review of 23 randomised controlled trials found that melatonin improved adult sleep quality on a standard questionnaire. The studies included adults with various illnesses and sleep disorders, however-not specifically travellers with jet lag. Results also varied substantially between studies. That makes the finding relevant to sleep, but indirect evidence for making jet lag itself end sooner.

This distinction matters. Better sleep during jet lag is useful, but it is not automatically proof that your circadian clock has adjusted more quickly. The available review can support saying that melatonin may improve sleep quality in some adults. It cannot support a promise that taking it will erase jet lag or reliably accelerate adaptation after a particular journey.

Supplements bring another uncertainty: their dose and purity can vary because they are not regulated by the United States Food and Drug Administration. Possible side effects include excess sleepiness, headache, stomach upset, changes in blood pressure and worsening depression symptoms. Check with your doctor before taking melatonin, particularly if you use other medicines, are pregnant or are trying to become pregnant.

Comfort is not the same as speed

Regular sleep and waking times, a relaxing bedtime routine, a regular meal pattern and daytime

physical activity are commonly recommended for circadian rhythm disorders. Limiting caffeine, alcohol and nicotine close to bedtime may also help protect sleep. These habits give your days and nights a clearer shape while your clock catches up.

But the supplied evidence does not show that each of these habits shortens jet lag. They are supportive measures, not proven fast-forward buttons. Even the large review of non-drug sleep interventions cannot settle the question: it studied critically ill people in intensive care units, not healthy travellers. Its findings about sleep, light and noise should not be quietly repackaged as jet-lag trial evidence.

The same restraint applies to caffeine. It may reduce daytime sleepiness, but it can interfere with the bedtime you are trying to adopt; general guidance advises avoiding it near the desired bedtime. Sleep-promoting medicines may help someone fall asleep or stay asleep, yet they can cause confusion and muscle weakness. Producing sleep is still not the same thing as resetting the clock.

So what actually has the strongest rationale for shortening the mismatch? Correctly timed light is the intervention explicitly used to reset the sleep-wake cycle for eastward and westward jet lag. Melatonin may help sleep, but these sources do not provide jet-lag-specific trial results. The evidence does not justify promising a precise recovery time for either.

Make Monday run on local time

For the next week, build your day around local light and local darkness. After eastward travel, morning light is used to move sleep and waking earlier; after westward travel, later-day light is used to move them later. Keep meals, activity, bedtime and waking anchored to the destination rather than allowing every tired spell to set a new schedule.

At night, make darkness concrete. You need blackout curtains or a sleep mask, plus a way to dim electronic light such as a screen filter or light-blocking glasses. Keep the sleeping space cool and quiet. These objects do not cure jet lag by themselves; they reduce competing light and noise while you establish the new day-night pattern.

If you are considering a light box or melatonin, talk with your doctor rather than improvising the timing or combining sleep products. Persistent disruption that interferes with daily activities, severe daytime sleepiness, reduced alertness or continuing problems with memory and decisions moves this beyond an ordinary travel inconvenience and into a medical conversation.

On Monday, put the sleep mask beside the bed and open the curtains for light at the part of the day that matches your direction of travel. It takes those simple objects-and a commitment to live by the destination's day, not the one your body still remembers.

Where this comes from

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