

# USC Center for Work & Family Life

## How to Cope with Jet Lag

For frequent fliers and international travelers, the symptoms of jet lag are all too familiar. Disturbed sleep, daytime fatigue, difficulty concentrating and functioning, and even stomach problems are a fact of life.

Fortunately, while you may not be able to eliminate jet lag altogether if you're traveling across multiple time zones, you can lessen its effects with some simple strategies.

### What Is Jet Lag?

Jet lag can occur any time you travel quickly across two or more time zones. The more time zones you cross, the more likely you are to be sleepy and sluggish --and the longer and more intense the symptoms are likely to be. Jet lag is a temporary sleep disorder, but not temporary enough for many travelers. If you're flying from San Francisco to Rome for a 10-day trip, for example, it may take six to nine days to fully recover. That's because it can take up to a day for each time zone crossed for your body to adjust to the local time. If you're traveling east to west, from Rome to San Francisco, jet lag could last four to five days -- about half the number of time zones crossed. Jet lag is generally worse when you "lose time" traveling west to east.

### What Causes Jet Lag?

Jet lag happens because rapid travel throws off our circadian rhythm -- the biological clock that helps control when we wake and fall asleep. Cues such as light exposure, mealtimes, social engagement, and activities regulate our circadian rhythm. When you cross time zones, it disrupts those, and your internal clock and the external time are desynchronized. Your body needs to get on the rhythm of the new time zone. Other aspects of air travel can aggravate the problem. Air cabins pressurized to 8,000 feet lower oxygen in the blood, making passengers feel uncomfortable and dehydrated. And people don't move around as much as usual on an airplane. These can increase symptoms of jet lag and further disrupt your circadian rhythm from re-synchronizing.

### 10 Tips for Dealing With Jet Lag

#### 1. Simulate your new schedule before you leave.

If you're traveling east, start moving your bedtime earlier. Shift your time a half-hour earlier each night for several nights before you leave. If you're traveling west, do the opposite. You can also try moving your mealtimes closer to the time you'll be taking them at your destination.

#### 2. Adapt to your new schedule while in flight.

Change your watch when you get on the plane. This is mostly psychological, but it helps you get into the mind-set of what you'll be doing in the place where you're going. Try to sleep on the plane if it's nighttime where you're going or stay awake if it's daytime -- but don't force it. It can be difficult to force yourself to sleep and that can cause frustration, which can then prevent sleep. If that happens, just

try to rest as much as possible.

### **3. Arrive early.**

If you need to be on top of your game for an event at your destination, try to arrive a few days early, so your mind and body can adjust.

### **4. Stay hydrated.**

Drink water before, during, and after your flight to counteract dehydration. Avoid alcohol or caffeine a few hours before you plan to sleep. Alcohol and caffeine can disrupt sleep and may cause dehydration.

### **5. Move around.**

Get up and walk around periodically, do some static exercises, and stretch on the flight. But after you land, avoid heavy exercise near bedtime, as it can delay sleep.

### **6. Try natural light therapy.**

Exposure to sunlight helps regulate our circadian rhythms. On westward flights, get bright morning light at your new destination, and avoid afternoon and evening light exposure. On eastward flights, avoid early light exposure in morning and get as much light as possible in the afternoon and early evening. The light helps shift your body's circadian clock, so that you feel rested and wake at appropriate times at your destination.

### **7. Eat sensibly.**

Some frequent fliers swear by jet lag diets -- such as eating a heavy diet for a few days before travel and fasting on flight day. No diets have been proven effective for preventing jet lag, however it is recommended to not eat a high carb or fatty diet close to bedtime because that can be disruptive to sleep.

### **8. Take a hot bath before bedtime.**

A bath can ease sore muscles from travel and help you relax and wind down. The drop in your body temperature when you get out of a bath may also make you sleepy.

### **9. Minimize sleep distractions.**

An eye mask or earplugs may help you sleep on the plane and at your destination. Try to eliminate distractions in your room at bedtime, such as light shining in through a window.

### **10. Consider medication.**

It's usually not necessary to get treatment for jet lag, but if these strategies don't work for you, your doctor may prescribe or suggest medications to take temporarily to help you sleep or stay alert when necessary.

### **Advice for Frequent Fliers**

If you fly frequently and jet lag is a problem, consider seeing a sleep specialist -- a physician or psychologist who has specialized training in sleep medicine. There are a number of ways that sleep specialists can help with shifting your body's circadian rhythm toward your new time zone, such as with light therapy, melatonin, or prescription medication that can help with jet lag symptoms.

For more information feel free to call CWFL at (213) 821-0800 or visit [www.usc.edu/worklife](http://www.usc.edu/worklife)