Melatonin ? Alleviates jet lag? [1]

Dear Alice,

How should melatonin be used to alleviate jet lag?

Answer

Dear Reader,

While jetting cross-country can be a fun adventure, coping with jet lag is often an unwelcome effect. Jet lag is a temporary disorder that occurs when air travelers rapidly travel across three or more time zones. Traversing time zones appears to interfere with a person’s production of melatonin, a hormone that helps regulate our sleep-wake cycles (see Melatonin [2] from the Go Ask Alice! archives for more information). This may explain why jet travel disrupts our sleeping patterns and why it takes a while for us to adjust to a new time zone. Travelers have the option of taking melatonin to help counteract the effects that flying has on getting a good night’s sleep.

Taking melatonin to reduce jet lag is a well-tested and safe use of the hormone. When the goal is to be in bed and asleep during the normal nighttime hours of your destination, timing is everything. If you take melatonin at the wrong time while still at home in New York, you may land safely in London, but your inner clock may be wandering around the Los Angeles airport wondering how it got on the wrong flight! So, what’s the trick?

The secret to shifting your internal clock lies in the direction of your flight and duration of your journey. Travelers who cross three or more time zones generally require more time to adjust. Depending on your travel direction, it is recommended to take melatonin as follows:

- Westward travel is associated with early evening sleepiness and predawn awakening. When traveling westward, melatonin can be taken in the morning.
- Traveling to the east is associated with struggling to fall asleep at the destination bedtime and difficulty arising in the morning. In this case, it is best to take melatonin in the evening at your local time.
- Melatonin can be taken 30 minutes before sleeping. You can also ask your health care provider about the right time to take it.
- Though side effects are uncommon, it is a good idea to avoid alcohol when using melatonin.

The severity of jet lag is also dependent on whether a person is able to sleep while traveling,
their age, and the availability of local circadian time cues at the destination (such as natural sunlight). Other than taking melatonin, your health care provider may recommend that you:

- Avoid alcohol, large meals, and caffeinated beverages during travel.
- Eat meals at the appropriate time of your destination.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Sleep, if possible, during long flights.
- Consider timed bright light exposure prior to and during travel.
- Take sleep-inducing medications, such as zolpidem (Ambien), eszopiclone (Lunesta) and zaleplon (Sonata), during travel and to help you sleep during the first couple of days after your arrival.

While adjusting to a new time zone may seem like a drag, don't worry, for your body will adjust in due time. Jet lag may last for several days, but it is a temporary condition that is normally manageable. Whether or not you choose to take melatonin depends on the severity of your jet lag and your preference to induce sleep. In the meantime, don't forget to adjust your watch as well. Happy (and restful) travels!

Alice!
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