

Jet lag buster: Tips for smooth travel

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

Matt Sheehan – Media Relations Coordinator

PRINT SCRIPT

As business and leisure travel [exceeds pre-pandemic levels](#), explorers are heading out on adventures across the world. What comes with the longer flights and multiple changes of time: jet lag.

What is jet lag?

“Jet lag is a condition which is called circadian rhythm disruption,” says Nadeem Ahmed, MD, pulmonologist with OSF HealthCare. “Circadian rhythm is based on your sleep cycle, day and night. Our body tends to rest when the sun is down and be more active when the sun is up. So, if you’re flying from the United States eastward, like to Europe or Asia, you lose time. Most of the flights from the U.S. heading east take off at night when the sun is down. The reason is so when you arrive, it is almost daylight there.”

Jet lag can be a sleep disruptor, Dr. Ahmed says, for a number of reasons.

“A lot of people don’t sleep on the plane; a lot of people don’t sleep when they’re out of the comfort of their own bedroom. So, when you arrive the next day, and Europe is usually six to eight hours ahead, you lose that time. So, the body tries to catch up,” Dr. Ahmed adds.

Tips to avoid jet lag

- Stay hydrated
- Keep your watch on the local time zone where you land
- Eat meals according to the local time zone
- Avoid alcohol
- Sleep according to the local time zone you are staying in
- Exercise to regulate the body as regular exercise [helps lowers blood pressure, improves cholesterol and reduces blood sugar.](#)

“People usually take two to three days to fully adjust, but if you do some of these steps we talked about, it can shorten the time significantly and help you adjust,” Dr. Ahmed says. “Try to adjust to the local time zone. If you’re coming back, you may be falling asleep at 6 or 7 p.m. but try to avoid that if you can. Adjust to your home time zone as soon as you can.”

Should I take sleep aids during long travel?

The short answer: with caution. Dr. Ahmed recommends avoiding prescription sleep medication while traveling as other options may be more beneficial.

“Over-the-counter sleep medicine is already popular; melatonin is one of them you can take without prescription. Benadryl is also available,” Dr. Ahmed says. “But there can be side effects, such as a hangover effect.”

How does the direction I travel affect potential jet lag?

"It's tougher for the body to get adjusted flying west. Coming back east, if you're living in the United States, is a little bit easier," Dr. Ahmed says. "Flying west, like if you're going to Korea, Japan or Australia, that has a lot more time zones. The more time zones you fly, the more chances of you getting jet lag."

Are there long-term effects of jet lag?

"The adjustment time for jet lag is minimal. It is just the circadian rhythm that's getting off-set or reset depending how you look at it. No, there's no long-term effects to it," Dr. Ahmed emphasizes.

Should I nap on a long flight?

A flight from Chicago, Illinois to Dublin, Ireland, is roughly 7 hours. Afternoon flights have you landing in the Emerald Isle at what feels like 11 p.m. to you but is really 5 a.m. Dublin time. But is shut eye on the plane a good idea before arriving at your destination?

"You can take a little nap when you land. You can take a little nap on the plane; it won't hurt you, but you don't have to. But I would recommend you avoid alcohol on the plane because it can cause dehydration," Dr. Ahmed adds.