

NO MORE JET LAG!

Tired of feeling cranky every time you step off a plane? Here's what you need to know about this temporary sleep disorder and how to beat it. By **Averlyn Lim**



Ever wondered why you struggle to sleep and wake up during the first few days of a holiday or business trip overseas? You could have been suffering from jet lag, a very common type of temporary sleep disorder which develops when you travel quickly through different time zones.

Dr Ahmad Izuanuddin Ismail, a consultant respiratory physician and honorary secretary of the Sleep Disorder Society in Malaysia, says that jet lag happens when we cross time zones too rapidly to keep pace with our body's circadian rhythm (inner biological clock), resulting in a desynchronisation of internal and external clocks.

It's safe to say that most of us who've hopped on a medium- or long-haul flight have experienced jet lag. The most common side effects are disorientation and fatigue, which travellers are forced to deal with before gradually adjusting to a new place. "Travel fatigue can be reversed within a day or two with adequate diet tweaks, rest and sleep, but it's not unusual for symptoms of jet lag to persist for a few more days until the circadian system is realigned," explains Dr Izuan. "In general, it takes about one day for each time zone crossed to adjust to the new time zone."

In extreme cases, jet lag can cause dehydration, nausea, dizziness and diarrhoea. To ensure you won't be holed up in your hotel room with the curtains drawn and therefore miss the best bits of your holiday, here's what you can do to help your body clock adjust to a new time zone.

1 START EARLY
Depending on where you're heading to, it's best to start easing your inner biological clock to the time zone at your destination even before the flight. "For example, if you are travelling westward, begin to reset your body clock a few days before the trip by sleeping one to two hours later," says Dr Izuan. "It is also important to get adequate sleep."


2 STAY HYDRATED
Dehydration is one of the most common effects of jet lag. Most people try to drink fewer fluids while on a flight to avoid heading to the bathroom constantly and disturbing other passengers. However, the UK's National Health Service (NHS) recommends drinking as much water as possible as the air on a plane is severely dry. Avoid alcohol and caffeinated drinks if you're planning on getting some sleep.



3 BE COMFORTABLE
If you have trouble sleeping on a plane, you might snooze better when you make yourself comfortable in your seat. Always keep these in your hand-carry: ear plugs, sleep mask, and a small pillow or neck rest. These could make all the difference between sleeping soundly during your flight and feeling exhausted by the time the plane lands.

4 GET MOVING
While it's important to get comfortable while you're on the plane, it's also equally important to move about and stretch your legs. According to Dr Izuan, this reduces the risk of blood clots (deep vein thrombosis) forming, especially during long-haul flights. Walk from one aisle to the next a few times during a flight.

5 SEE A DOCTOR
If you're travelling overseas for business meetings and have a history of suffering from jet lag, consult a doctor to see if you should pop sleeping pills to help ease the symptoms. "Sleeping medication at bedtime can be considered for a few nights until you have adjusted to the local time," explains Dr Izuan. However, he adds that sleeping pills should not be taken if you're at risk for deep-vein thrombosis, and it should not be combined with alcohol during a flight.

6 FOLLOW THE LIGHT
"When you are in a new time zone, try to expose your body to sunlight during the day as this reduces the production of melatonin, a hormone that helps you to fall asleep. This will initiate the process of resetting your internal clock," says Dr Ng Lee Li, chief medical officer at Columbia Asia Hospital-Bukit Rimau. Head outdoors as this forces your body clock to acknowledge it's daytime at your destination when it could very well be night-time at home. 

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