

How to maintain quality sleep during the holiday travel season

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While we sleep, DNA repair enzymes are hard at work fixing damaged cells to keep us healthy. Credit: Shutterstock

With shorter daylight hours, busier than usual schedules and travel to different time zones, the holiday season can disrupt our circadian rhythm and create sleep difficulties—making it even harder to avoid stress, enjoy time with family, and finally return to work.

Professor Helmut Zarbl, director at the Rutgers Environmental and

Occupational Health Sciences Institute (EOHHSI), and an expert on circadian rhythm disruption and sleep cycles, shares tips on how to minimize jet lag and sleep disruptions during the holidays.

Why is good quality sleep important?

While we sleep, DNA repair enzymes are hard at work fixing damaged cells to keep us healthy and help fight disease. Consistent, quality sleep is essential for this process.

How do traveling and shorter days during this the holiday season disrupt our sleep patterns?

Each cell in our body has a self-regulating, 24-hour [biological clock](#) that controls sleep and other bodily functions. But they need to work in unison. Our brain helps keep them synchronized by releasing a hormone called melatonin, through a process governed in part by the amount of light entering our eyes. When we're not getting enough sunlight or are traveling to different time zones, our cells start to wonder what time it is. This disrupts the melatonin levels in the body, which affects our internal clock, making it difficult to enjoy [quality sleep](#) at night.

What common effects do people feel when their internal clocks are out of sync after traveling?

Many people experience fatigue, headache, stress, digestive upsets, and general tiredness as a result of the body's internal clock imbalance. It usually takes about a week for the body's internal clock to adjust to new time zones and sleep patterns.

Are some groups of people more affected by sleep pattern disruptions and seasonal changes?

School children and [shift workers](#) like doctors, nurses, pilots, and firefighters are affected the most by sleep pattern disruptions and seasonal changes, since most of them work and sleep at inconsistent times—disrupting their normal internal clocks over long periods.

Studies have shown that most teenagers go to bed late and wake up early for school, which leads to the disruption of their body's internal clock and can affect their concentration at school.

Additional studies have also shown that shift workers are at higher risks of developing certain types of cancer due to their irregular sleep patterns.

What tips can you share for optimum sleep quality and safety during the holiday travel season?

If you're going to be traveling to a different time zone and will be there for an extended period, gradually shift your current bedtime closer to your destination's time over a period of days. This will help your body's [internal clock](#) to change slowly. However, if your trip is just for a couple of days, you can try to maintain your current meal and sleep time when you arrive at your destination, so you don't feel a dramatic change when you return home.

You must stay hydrated throughout your journey, but avoid the use of caffeine, alcohol, or other stimulants during your adjustment and hydration process. These worsen your jet lag symptoms.

When traveling, plan to arrive earlier at your destination so that you can enjoy some sunlight before the evening. It may help ease your ability to sleep. Opt to drive during the daytime, as more accidents happen at night.

Provided by Rutgers University

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