

FACTS ON JET LAG

JET LAG: When you travel through time zones, you can reset your watch in a matter of seconds. However, your body needs a full day per time zone to readjust, because the body's internal clockwork determines the timing of dozens of physiological processes. Jet lag is more than weariness; it is a period of subpar mental and physical functioning. Research shows that sleep stages are dramatically different on the first night after a long transcontinental or transoceanic flight and the REM sleep is delayed and shortened. A more normal sleep pattern reappears on the second night, but sleep still tends to be fragmented and brief. You are likely to wake up at dawn unable to return to sleep, and it may take five days to adjust your sleep pattern. The older you are, the more difficult it will be. Body temperature rhythms may not become synchronized with the new schedule for a week.

Even on the fastest new planes, jet lag cannot be avoided. However, some of its effects can be minimized. Among the common sense guidelines suggested by sleep specialists are:

*Begin the time shift before you leave home. You will have more problems adjusting if you have been following a rigid schedule of eating and sleeping up until the day of the flight. A week before you leave set one clock in your house to the destination time zone. Israel is ten hours ahead of Los Angeles. Gradually begin going to bed and getting up earlier.

*Leave home rested. Avoid frantic packing the night before your departure and a mad rush to the airport.

*Dress comfortably for the plane trip. Take off your shoes during the flight.

*Stretch occasionally and get up and walk. Alternately tense and relax your muscles.

*Travel with a friend if possible; companionship eases the tedium of a long flight.

*Eat lightly, drink water and fruit juices during the flight and for a few days afterward. Avoid coffee, tea and colas.

*On longer trips, start living by the new frame immediately. When in Rome, sleep when the Romans do.

*Rely on sleep rituals and relaxation exercises to ease you into sleep. Sleeping pills will not counter jet lag.

A more complex approach to jet lag involves the use of certain types of food to influence your body's sense of time. Developed by Charles Ehret at Argonne National Laboratory in Illinois, this plan has been tested and proved effective in tests with American soldiers flown from the United States to Europe for NATO maneuvers. The anti-jet-lag strategy for a west-to-east flight begins four days prior to departure, when you "feast," eating a large, high-protein breakfast and lunch and a large dinner rich in carbohydrates. The next day you fast, eating three skimpy, low-calorie, low-carbohydrate meals, just enough food to ward off feelings of dizziness or weakness. The next day is another time for feasting on large meals. The day of your flight you fast again, eating little and avoiding coffee and carbohydrates.

The moment you board your plane, you set your watch to the local time at your destination. You avoid eating a heavy meal on the plane, and you try to rest; it may be difficult to sleep because of the nonstop chatter of other passengers and the activity of the airline crew. If you are arriving in Europe early in the morning--the most typical schedule for American travelers--try to eat a high-protein breakfast and drink coffee before landing (you can ask the stewardess to save the dinner you refused earlier for this meal). After you disembark, take your time collecting your luggage, going through customs, and reaching your hotel. At noon eat a large lunch, high in protein. For dinner, eat an ample meal that is high in carbohydrates rather than protein. Go to bed at the appropriate local time and get up at a normal time, even if you have not slept well. This scheme does not eliminate jet lag, but it does minimize its aftereffects. For your own sake, plan a quiet, relaxed schedule for the first two or three days of your trip.

Here are a few simple exercises to help relieve stiff muscles, backaches and other discomfort that can plague travelers. All of these "air-obics" can be performed while in your airline seat, and can be done so discreetly that other passengers will probably not notice you're exercising. As you face forward, lean your head forward, then to either side. Each time, feel the stretch in your neck. Repeat 5 times. Push your shoulders forward while pulling in your stomach and chest. Then reverse; push your shoulders back, and arch your lower back. Repeat 10 times. Grasp the right armrest with your left hand. Feel the stretch as you turn your upper body to the right and look behind you. Then grasp the left armrest with your right hand and turn to the left. Repeat 5 times. Pick up one foot from the ground and rotate your ankle, making circles in the air--10 times to the right, and 10 times to the left. Repeat with the other foot.