Managing jet lag
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Good sleeping habits

Many travellers find it helpful to establish a pre-sleep routine to help train their mind and body that it is time to relax and fall asleep. As part of this, a set of cues can be developed which will assist the individual to relax in preparation for sleep anywhere and anytime.

Attention must also be paid to the sleep environment and efforts made to ensure that the room is dark (by the use of eye shades if necessary) and quiet (by turning off the telephone and using ear plugs). The bed should, of course, be comfortable, although in a hotel this is largely outside the traveller's control and what is comfortable for one person may not be ideal for another.

At home and during trips, efforts should be made to keep sleep time protected. Individuals should avoid going to bed hungry, as this will delay sleep, but conversely, eating a heavy meal before bed will also disrupt sleep. Therefore, if hungry at bed-time, travellers should eat a light snack or have something to drink, but avoid alcohol as it significantly reduces sleep quality.

Caffeine is also known to prevent sleep onset and disrupt subsequent sleep in susceptible people. Whilst caffeine is present in highest quantities in coffee, tea and colas, it is also present in chocolate and some individuals are so sensitive that a chocolate dessert is enough to interfere with sleep. Travellers should therefore ensure that they avoid caffeine for several hours before planned bed-time.

Sleep scheduling

Individuals who are sleep deprived before the start of their trip are likely to experience more problems coping with the effects of circadian desynchronisation than those who are well rested. Travellers should aim to get the best sleep possible before their journey and to obtain at least as much sleep each day overseas as they would at home.

Travellers must also learn to trust themselves. If it is difficult to stay awake, then sleepiness should be taken as a clear sign to obtain sleep. Conversely, if on waking spontaneously an individual is alert and unable to sleep, then sleepiness should be taken as a clear sign to obtain sleep. Conversely, if on waking spontaneously an individual is alert and unable to sleep, they should get up. It is possible to force wakefulness but not sleep.

Napping

Napping has been shown in studies to improve subsequent alertness and performance (Rosekind et al., 1991). However, to avoid the sleep inertia experienced when waking from deep sleep and the resultant sensation of disorientation, the duration of a nap should be limited to a maximum of 45 minutes. Although short, a nap of this length will nonetheless help to decrease the period of continuous wakefulness and thereby reduce tiredness.

Naps may also, of course, be longer and, when circumstances permit, a nap of two hours or more will enable an individual to experience at least one full cycle of deep and dreaming sleep. Adequate time must however be allowed for subsequent recovery from sleep inertia.

Finally, although beyond the scope of this brief overview, it must be recognised that some travellers do employ other additional strategies. These include the use of light exposure and pharmacological agents including temazepam (a hypnotic) and melatonin, although with regard to the latter, the evidence for efficacy is far from convincing (Spitzer et al., 1999).

In summary, the effective management of jet lag hinges on an appreciation of the physiological need for sleep and a recognition of
the value of simple strategies which allow the traveller to effectively utilise sleep opportunities following transmeridian travel.

References


KLEIN K E, WEGMANN H M and HUNT B I (1972). Desynchronisation of biological rhythms. Lancet, i(7967), 977-981


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