

Does British Summer Time damage your health?

As the clocks go forward, Helen Croydon asks if the extra hour of daylight stops us getting the sleep that we need

A long sleep, according to an Irish proverb, is one of the best cures. But as Britain's 17 million insomniacs will tell you, a long sleep does not always occur on demand.

The onset of sleep is triggered by two things: a decrease in body temperature and an increase in the production of the hormone melatonin. The pineal gland, a small endocrine gland in the centre of the brain, is stimulated by dim light or the dark – when it will start to release melatonin – and inhibited by light. For some people, the onset of British Summer Time, with early dawns and longer twilight, brings with it a host of problems.

Nathaniel Lippiett, 27, is a video journalist who dreads the clocks going forward: "Light unnerves me. It reminds me it's morning and I think I need to get up. At the height of the summer that's at 4am. Then I can't get back to sleep because I start worrying that I've not had enough sleep. Then I start worrying that the worry is stopping me sleeping. I call it meta-worry."

Alex Oberberg, 28, a digital

marketing manager, has similar experiences. "I can be really tired, but if it's not pitch black, I can't sleep. I feel light seeping through my eyelids. Even the light from a TV affects me. In the winter, I can fall asleep at six in the evening as long as it's dark, but in the summer I'm in trouble."

Alex's problem is exacerbated by the fact that his fiancée's sleeping habits do not change from season to season. "In the summer she'll sleep for hours after dawn has broken. I'm left lying wide awake during those same hours."

Sleep experts agree that light sensitivity varies between individuals. "Some people are more photosensitive and light affects them more," says

physiotherapist Sammy Margo, author of *The Good Sleep Guide*. "If that's the case, then even turning a light on for a few seconds while you visit the lavatory during the night can cause levels of melatonin to fall, making it hard to get back to sleep. These days more of us keep light-generating gadgets in our rooms – games consoles, iPods, TVs – and they can all interfere with melatonin levels."

Dr Peter Mills of the health consulting service Glasslyn has done extensive research on the role of light in sleep. "White light is made up of rays of different wavelengths," he explains. "Sunlight contains UV rays, which have a very short wavelength. They represent the blue area of the colour spectrum."

"We have special receptors on our retinas, called photoreceptive ganglion cells. They aren't involved in vision but are connected by

nerves directly into our 'body clock', which is a part of our brain controlled by circadian rhythms.

"Our body clock tells us when it's time to sleep and wake and controls our temperature, blood pressure, digestion and hormone production. Bright light which incorporates short wavelength rays – that is, sunlight – is known to have the greatest impact on our body clocks and our mood. So exposure to bright light in the morning will make us feel more awake, but it can also help us prepare for sleep later by 'setting' the body clock. The light tells our brain that when it next goes dark, it will be time to sleep again."

“We need six to eight hours of sleep a night, regardless of season”

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a break.”

A sleep debt is something that worries Nathaniel Lippiett, yet he concedes that he rarely feels tired after a wakeful night. That would indicate that his body gets its required amount of rest in fewer hours in summer than in winter. Studies on indigenous people in Finland, which experiences 24-hour darkness in winter and constant daylight in summer, have found that the amount of sleep they need can vary by up to eight hours per night between the height of each season.

Professor Jim Horne, director of the Sleep Research Centre at the University of Loughborough, believes that evolution has given us an innate

flexibility in our body clocks: "It was dangerous for our ancestors to sleep in daylight because they were open to attack, so we slept several hours less in the summer. We still have this natural propensity to adapt our sleeping patterns but modern, urbanised living has superseded our need to alter it.

"We can't say that just because we are not getting eight hours in the summer we are sleep-deprived. Sleep is like food or sex. There is a minimum amount required for functionality, but we can indulge in more if we require. A certain amount of our sleep is a time filler in the winter."

Simple steps can help people who find it more difficult to sleep during longer summer daylight hours, says Sammy Margo: "Remove light-emitting gadgets from your room, relocate your bedroom to a different side of the house if you are bothered by streetlights or the morning sun. And get at least 15 minutes of sunlight, without sunglasses, in the morning."

She adds that sleep debt can get blown out of proportion and worry can make it worse: "However, constant sleep deprivation is very serious. It's not like an overdrawn bank account which can be made up later. But if you are not feeling sleepy during the day a couple of hours less sleep is probably not harming you."

It seems that we could be obsessed unnecessarily with getting enough sleep. So instead of rushing to buy blackout blinds and smothering light-emitting devices in an attempt to protect our melatonin levels, perhaps we should welcome British Summer Time as an opportunity to seize more hours in our day.

Spring into action: bluebells signify the end of winter, but the extra daylight affects many people's sleep

The verdict Spy's shoulder arms are much better. She can believe the amount of dry skin disappeared in the exfoliation how smooth her skin feels. So relaxed that finding she he heating when she returns he fails to induce even a grimace.



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