

Latest News

Spring forward... get back your health

By: Your health / Tara Maltman-Just

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One week to go before March 9 -- the date you officially "spring forward" by setting your clocks ahead one hour.

Considering the blowy, snowy weather we've had of late, the thought of anything related to spring sounds pretty good to me. But as you set that alarm forward, are you also going to set back your health?



COLIN CORNEAU/BRANDON SUN
Time to start thinking about your fitness level.

Studies, including one published in the New England Journal of Medicine, have shown this one hour of reduced sleep does indeed affect our health. The daylight savings time shift has been linked with increased motor-vehicle accidents and even risk of heart attack.

And the fact it comes on a Sunday doesn't help much, either. Monday is the day of the week already associated with the highest risk of heart attack. Many would argue Mondays are also a source of considerable angst with the stress of a new work week. In my practice, I work with many people who have chronic insomnia, and the Sunday-night sleep is often reported as the worst.

Regardless of the day, there is no doubt an hour of sleep lost is detrimental to anyone's health, mental clarity, weight management and productivity at work. Many people are already chronically sleep-deprived. Naturally, the hour lost in spring is worse than the hour gained in fall. And simply sleeping in an extra hour Sunday will not support our body's sleep-wake cycle optimally.

Instead of hitting the alarm repeatedly next week in denial or stumbling out of bed in a groggy stupor, you can set yourself up for success by following a few key steps:

1. Start tonight. There's no time like the present. You can ease your body into a new circadian rhythm or sleep-wake cycle by making gradual changes over the course of the next week.
2. Start slowly. March 2-3: Go to sleep 15 minutes earlier and set your alarm 15 minutes earlier. March 4-5: repeat. March 6-7: Another 15 minutes earlier to bed and to wake. March 8: You've got the idea. Come March 9, you'll be on your new schedule, in advance of the Monday.
3. Morning light. Turn on your light switches and your technology and open your blinds. The increase in light exposure almost immediately decreases your melatonin levels, which helps you awaken for the day.
4. Evening darkness. This is basically the reverse of 3. I recommend you pay special attention to iPads, iPhones and similar devices that emit a great deal of light. You can turn the lights off in your home earlier in the evening, to prepare you for sleep. An eye mask can help ensure total darkness come nighttime as well.
5. Exercise. Focus on exercise earlier in the day, particularly the morning. The temperature rise from this physical activity also plays a part in guiding your sleep-wake cycle.

6. Food. For starters, you can incorporate more foods that support key sleep chemicals, including tryptophan and melatonin: walnuts, dairy products such as Greek yogurt or cheese and pineapple. Carbohydrate-based or magnesium-rich foods also help you fall asleep, such as steel-cut oatmeal, toast, bananas or almonds.

7. Melatonin. Proven useful to combat jet lag, melatonin can certainly be considered to help you get to sleep earlier the week before (or after) the time shift. The dose and its usefulness for you should be individualized with your personal health-care practitioner. I often recommend a sublingual professional-grade formulation starting at 1-3 mg, which can be dissolved under the tongue 20 to 30 minutes before bed.

A few states, including Hawaii, do not partake in the daylight savings time ritual. Paradise, indeed... (although I'm sure the year-long warmth, ample sunlight and expansive vistas also help). With that said, Winnipeg is a great city. We're hardy. And we can still get our little slice of paradise, by saying aloha (goodbye to sleep deprivation, and aloha (hello) to a new season of health. And hopefully some warmer weather.

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