



# Melatonin - Overview

## What is melatonin?

Melatonin is a hormone made by the pineal gland, a small gland in the brain. Melatonin helps control your sleep and wake cycles. Very small amounts of it are found in foods such as meats, grains, fruits, and vegetables. You can also buy it as a supplement.

## What does natural melatonin do in the body?

Your body has its own internal clock that controls your natural cycle of sleeping and waking hours. In part, your body clock controls how much melatonin your body makes. Normally, melatonin levels begin to rise in the mid- to late evening, remain high for most of the night, and then drop in the early morning hours. Light affects how much melatonin your body produces. During the shorter days of the winter months, your body may produce melatonin either earlier or later in the day than usual. This change can lead to symptoms of seasonal affective disorder (SAD), or winter depression. Natural melatonin levels slowly drop with age. Some older adults make very small amounts of it or none at all. Evidence appears to point to similar issues in people with Autism Spectrum Disorders.

## Why is melatonin used as a dietary supplement?

First, it is important to know that while Melatonin is freely available over the counter in many countries, in some (such as the UK), it is a prescription only drug that can only be obtained from your doctor. (In the UK, for children, the initial prescription must come from a paediatrician etc.)

Melatonin supplements are sometimes used to treat jet lag or sleep problems (insomnia).

Scientists are also looking at other good uses for melatonin, such as:

- Treating seasonal affective disorder (SAD).
- Helping to control sleep patterns for people who work night shifts.
- Preventing or reducing problems with sleeping and confusion after surgery.
- Reducing chronic cluster headaches.

## Is taking a melatonin dietary supplement safe?

In most cases, melatonin supplements are safe in low doses for short-term and long-term use. But be sure to talk with your doctor about taking them.

Children and pregnant or nursing women should not take melatonin without talking to a doctor first.

Melatonin does have side effects. But they will go away when you stop taking the supplement. Side effects may include:

- Sleepiness.
- Lower body temperature.
- Vivid dreams.
- Morning grogginess.
- Small changes in blood pressure.

If melatonin makes you feel drowsy, do not drive or operate machinery when you are taking it.

During health exams, tell your doctor if you or your child are taking melatonin. And tell your doctor if you are having trouble sleeping (insomnia), because it may be related to a medical problem.

In adults, melatonin is taken in doses from 0.2 mg to 20.0 mg, based on the reason for its use. The right dose varies widely from one person to another. Talk to your doctor to learn the right dosage and to find out if melatonin is right for you. In children, it is best to seek professional advice.