

Melatonin FAQ

What is melatonin?

Melatonin is a hormone that's produced naturally in the brain to signal the body that it is time to sleep. It is secreted at night.

How can melatonin be used?

Melatonin is usually used to treat difficulty falling asleep that has not responded to other treatments. It is NOT a sleeping pill, and rarely helps with night wakings. It should only be used under the supervision of a health care professional.

When might melatonin be considered?

Melatonin is never a "first line" treatment and is rarely appropriate for long-term use. For most children with chronic trouble sleeping, there is a specific cause that should be identified and managed with a change in schedules, habits, or behaviors before considering melatonin. For example, many children experience delays in sleep onset because of too much light exposure at night, which suppresses their body's own melatonin. Make sure to keep the lights dim in the evenings and stop all electronics (especially handhelds, like phones and tablets) at least an hour before bedtime.

Is melatonin safe?

There is limited data available on the long-term use of melatonin, but studies have shown it is safe for short-term or occasional use. The goal is to use the lowest beneficial dose for the shortest amount of time. Studies of melatonin in animals have raised concerns about whether melatonin could affect the timing of puberty, but such effects have not been found in humans. Side effects of melatonin are rare, but can include vivid dreams, headaches, or grogginess in the morning.

Is melatonin effective?

Most of the studies on melatonin have been conducted on children with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, or visual impairment, and have shown small to moderate improvements in total sleep duration and in how long it takes to fall asleep. A few studies have also shown benefits with typically developing children.

How much melatonin should my child take?

If your pediatric sleep medicine specialist or pediatrician has prescribed melatonin, the dose will depend on your child's age, with younger children needing less than older children. Doses usually range from 0.5 mg to 5 mg. Melatonin is generally not prescribed in children under age 2.

When should melatonin be taken?

The peak effect is usually seen 30-60 minutes after taking melatonin. Taking it earlier is usually not helpful. (There are some exceptions, such as if your doctor prescribes it for jet lag or Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome). Melatonin should be taken at the beginning of a relaxing non-screen bedtime routine.

How do I select the right one for my child?

Melatonin is available in several forms, including tablets, liquid, gummies, and dissolvables. Handle melatonin with care, and keep it out of reach of children. Since melatonin is considered a “dietary supplement” in the US, it is not regulated by the FDA like medications. Melatonin content in supplements can vary widely, and can be more or less than is indicated on the label. Select a product that's been tested by an independent lab to ensure purity and accurate dosing. Look for certification from USP, NSF, or CL on the label.

