Why You Feel "Wired but Tired" Every Spring—and What You Can Do About It

Try these easy tips to help reset your sleep, energy, and mood this spring.

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Key Takeaways

Increased daylight boosts alertness and social energy but can make it harder to wind down, leading to that familiar "wired but tired" feeling.

Early-morning cortisol spikes and delayed melatonin production can leave night owls especially vulnerable to sluggish mornings and late-night energy bursts.

Evening cues (dim lights, reduced screens, warm baths, etc.) and daytime strategies (morning light exposure, outdoor activity, early cognitive tasks, etc.) support circadian alignment and improve sleep quality.

Aside from warmer temperatures, the biggest shift in early spring is the change in light: one of the most powerful regulators of the nervous system. The increase in daylight can leave you feeling mentally sharp and socially energized, but less inclined to wind down, resulting in that wired-but-tired feeling. Here, experts explain why it happens and share practical strategies to help your nervous system gently realign with the season.

The Hormones Behind Your Sleep-Wake Cycle

Cortisol and melatonin are two hormones that work together to regulate the body's daily timing system and keep the sleep–wake cycle in sync. "During the day, [melatonin] levels stay low, so you feel alert," explains Angela Holliday-Bell, MD, board-certified physician and clinical sleep specialist. "As evening approaches and light decreases, your brain starts producing more, which signals that it's time to wind down and prepare for sleep."

Cortisol ramps up early in the morning, around 5 a.m., to give the body energy it needs to wake and get going, says Steven Thau, MD, sleep medicine internist. It gradually declines throughout the day but remains high enough to support focus, metabolism, and activity. As

daylight fades, melatonin production rises and lowers the body's core temperature, nudging the nervous system into a restorative state while cortisol drops to its lowest levels, removing the body's "alert" signal.

Why Spring Throws Off Your Sleep Schedule

Our bodies are finely tuned to our circadian rhythm—the natural cycle of day and night—which adjusts sleep, energy, appetite, and focus to match daylight and temperature patterns. "Normally, this transition happens gradually over days or weeks, giving our internal clocks time to adapt," says Julia Whitaker, MD, quadruple board-certified physician. "Daylight saving time, however, forces the change all at once, creating a mismatch between our biological rhythms and our schedules."

When spring brings brighter mornings, cortisol rises earlier, but sleep quantity and quality may not have caught up. This can leave us sleepy when we need to be alert, or wired when it's time for bed. "This disruption can affect not only alertness but also hormones like cortisol, thyroid function, and core body temperature, leading to symptoms such as brain fog, increased cravings, and difficulty falling asleep, especially if sleep becomes shorter or more fragmented during the transition," Dr. Whitaker says.

Winter Sleep Debt Further Fuels the Mismatch

After months of darker winter days, many of us carry subtle sleep debt. "Shorter daylight hours can disrupt circadian rhythms because many people get less sunlight in the morning, which makes it harder for the brain to stay on a consistent sleep schedule," Dr. Holliday-Bell says. "Colder weather also often leads to less outdoor activity and movement, which reduces the natural sleep pressure that helps us fall asleep more easily at night."

Winter evening routines often include more screen time or holiday disruptions, which can further push back bedtime and chip away at total sleep time. "When these patterns persist for weeks or months, they can lead to accumulated sleep debt that many people begin to notice as spring approaches," Dr. Holliday-Bell says.

When our internal clock is out of sync, like when cortisol levels don't align with our usual daily rhythms, the brain can interpret that mismatch as a form of stress. "The nervous system may stay in a more activated state instead of shifting into the calm, restorative mode that supports sleep, which can show up physically as muscle tension, restlessness, or feeling on edge," Dr. Whitaker says.

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Night Owls Feel the Effects More

People whose circadian rhythms naturally run late may feel sleepy later in the evening and prefer waking later in the morning. “Because work and family responsibilities usually require us to be active early in the day, people with later body clocks may feel like their bodies are still in ‘sleep mode’ in the morning, making the springtime shift particularly challenging,” Dr. Whitaker says. “Morning symptoms can include sluggishness, brain fog, and low energy or motivation, while evenings may bring a feeling of being wired, increased nighttime appetite, or a second wind of productivity.” In contrast, morning larks, who have naturally earlier circadian rhythms, may feel more in sync with earlier daylight, Dr. Whitaker adds.

Evening Habits That Help You Wind Down for Better Sleep

“I’d caution people from using melatonin unless they are on a regular sleep schedule, as too much exogenous melatonin can have the opposite effect,” Dr. Thau says, noting that many take it at the wrong time. Instead, focus on non-medicated habits that help regulate hormones and brain chemicals signaling alertness and sleepiness.

Longer daylight makes it helpful to create cues that tell the brain the day is ending, even if it’s still light outside. “Dimming lights in the two to three hours before bedtime and limiting screen use can support the body’s natural wind-down process,” Dr. Whitaker says. “Instead of screens, consider relaxing alternatives like playing a card game, reading under soft lighting, going for a walk, or listening to an audiobook.” If screens are unavoidable, Dr. Whitaker suggests blue-light–blocking glasses.

Warm showers or baths can help, too. “The drop in body temperature afterward can make it easier to fall asleep,” Dr. Holliday-Bell says. She also recommends a glass of golden dairy milk in the evening, made with turmeric, cinnamon, and a sweetener like honey or maple syrup. Dairy milk contains nutrients that support healthy sleep, including tryptophan, magnesium, and calcium. “Tryptophan helps the body produce serotonin and melatonin, which regulate your sleep cycle, reducing the time it takes to fall asleep and increasing total sleep time,” she says.

Daytime Habits Can Also Help Reset Your Body Clock

Incorporating daytime exercise can help recalibrate the body. “Early exercise can move the body clock earlier by supporting a healthy daytime rise in cortisol, which should naturally decline in the evening,” Dr. Whitaker says. Exercising outdoors is especially effective: “Getting exposure to morning light within the first hour or two after waking is one of the most powerful ways to set your circadian rhythm,” she says. “Direct outdoor light is many times more intense than light through a window or sunglasses.”

Beyond movement, Dr. Whitaker notes that frontloading stimulation, like scheduling cognitively demanding tasks earlier in the day, can help shift the nervous system and reduce

this mismatch, reinforcing signals that align the body's circadian rhythm with the new schedule. "For mental work, it's fine to tackle cognitively demanding tasks at the time of day when you feel most focused, but try to limit activities that trigger stress or frustration—like responding to difficult emails—later in the day, since they can drive up cortisol and make it harder to wind down," Dr. Whitaker says.

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