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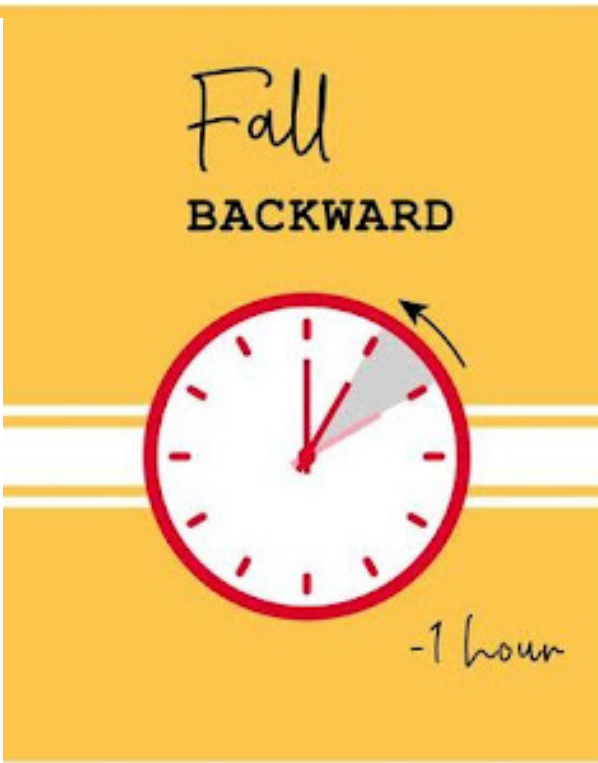


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Why Daylight Saving Time is Unhealthy
– A Neurologist Explains



By Beth Ann Malow
Professor of Neurology and Pediatrics, Vanderbilt University

As people in the U.S. prepared to turn their clocks ahead one hour in mid-March, I found myself bracing for the annual ritual of media stories about the disruptions to daily routines caused by switching from standard time to daylight saving time.

About a third of Americans said they don't look forward to these twice-yearly time changes. An overwhelming 63% to 16% majority would like to eliminate them completely.

But the effects go beyond simple inconvenience. Researchers are discovering that "springing ahead" each March is connected with serious negative health effects.

At 2 a.m. on Sunday, March 13, 2022, clocks spring forward one hour. They fall back at 2 a.m. on Sunday, Nov. 6, 2022. iam2mai/iStock via Getty Images Plus

I'm a professor of neurology and pediatrics at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tennessee, and the director of our sleep division. In a 2020 commentary for the journal JAMA Neurology, my co-authors and I reviewed the evidence linking the annual transition to daylight saving time to increased strokes, heart attacks and teen sleep deprivation.

Based on an extensive body of research, my colleagues and I believe that the science establishing these links is strong and that the evidence makes a good case for adopting permanent standard time nationwide – as I testified at a recent Congressional

hearing.

Missing sleep, worse health
"Falling back" – going from daylight saving time to standard time each November by turning the clocks back one hour – is relatively benign. While some people may feel thrown off balance and need a few weeks to recover, research hasn't linked it to serious impacts on health.

Springing forward is harder on the body, however. This is because our clock time is moved an hour later; in other words, it feels like 7 a.m. even though our clocks say it is 8 a.m. So it's a permanent shift to later morning light for almost eight months – not just for the day of the change or a few weeks afterward. This is particularly notable because morning light is valuable for helping to set the body's natural rhythms: It wakes us up and improves alertness.

Although the exact reasons are not yet known, this may be due to light's effects on increasing levels of cortisol, a hormone that modulates the stress response or the effect of light on the amygdala, a part of the brain involved in emotions.

In contrast, exposure to light later into the evening delays the brain's release of melatonin, the hormone that promotes drowsiness. This can interfere with sleep and cause us to sleep less overall, and the effect can last even after most people adjust to losing an hour of sleep at the start of daylight saving time.

Because puberty also causes melatonin to be released later at night, meaning that teenagers have a delay in the natural signal that helps them fall asleep, adolescents are particularly susceptible to sleep problems from the extended evening light of daylight saving time. This shift in melatonin during puberty lasts into our 20s.

Adolescents also may be chronically sleep deprived due to school, sports and social activity schedules. For instance, many children start school around 8 a.m. or earlier. This means that during daylight saving time, many young people get up and travel to school in pitch darkness.

The "western edge" effect
Geography can also make a difference in how daylight saving time affects people. One study showed that people living on the western edge of a time zone, who get light later in the morning and light later in the evening, got less sleep than their counterparts on the eastern edge of a time zone.

This study found that western edge residents had higher rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and breast cancer, as well as lower per capita income and higher health care costs. Other research has found that rates of certain other cancers are higher on the western edge of a time zone.

Scientists believe that these health problems may result from a combination of chronic sleep deprivation and "circadian misalignment". Circadian misalignment refers to a mismatch in timing between our biological rhythms and the outside world. In other words, the timing of daily work, school or sleep routines is based on the clock, rather than on the sun's rise and set.

This video takes a deeper dive – all the way back

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