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Springing forward: Why the time change hits some people harder than others

While effects of the change can be relatively small overall, they could "lead to measurable increases in sleep deprivation-related injuries that are entirely preventable"

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MAR 7, 2026 6:00 AM

Deana Buchart
The 'spring forward' of daylight saving time comes with health concerns

One of the most vulnerable groups is also the youngest. Infants' and toddlers' circadian systems are still developing, making them too responsive to environmental cues, such as daylight, that help regulate sleep and wake cycles, Mr. Lebrec said.

"The circadian system is still developing," he said. "The strength of entrainment cues, like environmental stimuli, is still kind of getting figured out."

Teens, too, are sometimes more affected by the changing clocks because of their biology, Mr. Lebrec said.

During puberty, the body naturally shifts toward a later sleep schedule — a phenomenon known as a "phase delay," he said.

That shift means teenagers' internal clocks naturally push them toward staying up later and waking later, so when the clocks jump forward an hour, teens must wake even earlier relative to their natural rhythm.

Teenagers are often chronically sleep deprived, but the clock change may not be their biggest sleep disruption.

"We know early-school-start times are already hard for many teens," said Dr. Nelson, a pediatrician and sleep medicine health at Penn State University. "The earlier the high school start time, the more the teens are sleep deprived. This abrupt spring time change just makes it harder to be alert."

Deana Buchart
Daylight saving time is 'time' to fall back to standard time this Sunday, but at what cost?

Teens, too, are "often victims of what's called social jet lag," said Randy Nelson, professor and chair of West Virginia University's department of neuroscience. Teens tend to maintain strict weekday sleep schedules but dramatically shift them on weekends.

ADHD and delayed body clocks

People with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder may also face a steeper adjustment, Mr. Lebrec noted.

Research published in December in Frontiers in Psychiatry suggests ADHD is linked with significant circadian rhythm disruption. The body's natural release of melatonin — the hormone that signals the body to prepare for sleep — is delayed in people with ADHD.

For children with ADHD, the delay is about 40 minutes on average; for adults it can be up to an hour, he said.

"With this spring-forward time change you're asking people whose clocks are already running 45 minutes to an hour and-a-half late to advance even more," he said.

So, while most people adjust after a couple of days, those with ADHD could be struggling with the time change for a week or longer.

Dementia and damaged timekeeping centers

For those diagnosed with dementia, time-change adjustment difficulties can stem from changes within the brain itself.

One of the earliest brain regions affected in Alzheimer's disease, Mr. Lebrec said, is the suprachiasmatic nucleus — "that's the central circadian timekeeper in the brain."

Damage to that region makes it harder for the brain to interpret signals such as daylight that help regulate sleep cycles.

"Because of that, the actual hardware in your brain that's responsible for responding to light and other environmental stimuli that cause shifts in circadian timing is compromised," Lebrec said.

That disruption contributes to symptoms like "sundowning," in which people with dementia become confused or agitated in the evening.

Researchers are also studying whether sleep disruptions themselves might serve as early warning signs of cognitive decline.

"Sleep disorders and behavioral changes in the timing of when people are waking up, when they are most active, when they are going to bed — it does seem like there's some evidence that changes in the timing and patterns can predict or be a risk factor for developing dementia," Mr. Lebrec said.

Health risks tied to clock shock

Large epidemiological studies have also linked the spring shift with temporary spikes in heart attacks, strokes and car crashes, Mr. Lebrec said. Those studies track population-level trends rather than individual medical histories, making it difficult to pinpoint the precise causes.

But sleep deprivation and circadian disruption are thought to play a role.

"Fatal car accidents rise by 6% during the week after the time shift," Mr. Nelson pointed out. "Even falling back, having that extra sleep, still causes this disregulation of the clock, which affects attention."

"Those already sleep-deprived will face the biggest hurdle" from the time change, Mr. Boston said in an email, adding that the risk of "performing commute or travel in the dark can be more dangerous."

While effects of the time change can be relatively small overall, they could "lead to measurable increases in sleep deprivation-related injuries that are entirely preventable," he said.

The best way to prepare

If there's one strategy sleep researchers recommend, it's adjusting gradually.

Shifting one's waking and bedtime schedule by 15 minutes starting about three days before the change may help, and morning light exposure is especially powerful in resetting the body's clock.

Interim-simulating alarm clocks can help people wake more gently, but natural light still works best.

"Especially in Pittsburgh in March when it's gloomy, even just getting outside, even on a cloudy day, is pretty good," Mr. Lebrec said.

Mindfully limiting blue light — a type of melatonin-suppressing light emitted by the sun, LED bulbs and digital screens — can also help, Mr. Nelson said.

Daylight saving versus standard

The twice-yearly clock change has prompted renewing legislative proposals to eliminate the switch.

From a health perspective, many sleep researchers favor permanent standard time, including the Sleep Research Society and the American Academy of Sleep Medicine.

So does Mr. Lebrec: "Earlier light exposure is generally healthier for people."

Standard time "better aligns natural sunlight and our body clocks," agreed Mr. Boston. Switching to it permanently would be a partial foreshadowing of how national DST would feel if it were enacted (but bodies have evolved to handle just that.)

If the country stayed on permanent daylight saving time, winter sunrises could occur well after 8 a.m. in places like Pittsburgh, meaning more people commuting and going to school in darkness.

A 2019 study by University of Pittsburgh and Drexel researchers found that people living on the western edges of time zones — where sunsets occur later — sleep an average of 19 minutes less than residents on the eastern side.

The researchers also found higher levels of social jet lag and lower economic productivity among those western-border residents. The misalignment between biological and social time, they concluded, is associated with greater sleep deprivation, reduced labor income and higher health care costs.

Regardless of which time system prevails, Mr. Nelson said ending the clock changes themselves should be the priority. "I have signed many petitions. I have testified many times. Yes, get rid of it."

He pointed to examples such as Arizona, which remains on standard time year-round. In Canada, British Columbia is planning on sticking with daylight saving time after this weekend's switch rather than reverting to standard time in the fall.

Pennsylvania lawmakers have also debated the issue, with no clear consensus.

Right now, there are competing efforts in the state Legislature: House Bill 119 promotes a permanent shift to standard time and House Resolution 349 urges Congress to adopt permanent daylight saving. Both efforts were referred last year to the Intergovernmental Affairs & Operations committee.

Rep. Joe McAndrew, D-Penn Hills, is the prime sponsor of the resolution calling for the permanent adoption of daylight saving.

He said "the reality is that most people in today's society have a different clock" than even a few decades ago. People would rather enjoy a little extra daylight in the evening than have earlier sunrises. Additionally, he claimed the switch would make evening commutes safer and result in energy savings.

In conjunction with this effort, Mr. McAndrew said he also supports a later start time for schoolchildren, a move that would allay the worry of their waiting at their morning bus stops in the dark.

Rep. Russ Diamond, R-Lebanon, is the prime sponsor of House Bill 119, the push for permanent standard time. "I keep hearing from a lot of my folks in the spring of spring members," Mr. Diamond told the Post-Gazette in January 2025, adding that his effort stems from years of hearing complaints from constituents who feel out of sync after the time change.

He pointed to research linking clock changes to spikes in car crashes, heart attacks and workplace accidents.

"These things happen on different levels, both in the spring and the fall," said Mr. Diamond, adding that he finds the shift harder with age: "It takes me about two weeks to actually get adjusted," especially in the spring.

First Published: March 7, 2026, 4:00 a.m.
Updated: March 7, 2026, 10:48 p.m.

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