e-ISSN: 0976-822X, p-ISSN:2961-6042

Available online on http://www.ijcpr.com/

International Journal of Current Pharmaceutical Review and Research 2023; 15(4); 401-406

Systematic Review

Efficacy of Melatonin and Melatonin Agonists for Sleep Disturbances in Major Depressive Disorder: A Systematic Review

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Received: 10-02-2023 / Revised: 01-03-2023 / Accepted: 28-03-2023

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Conflict of interest: Nil

Abstract

Background: Sleep disturbances are highly prevalent in major depressive disorder (MDD), affecting 60–90% of patients, and are associated with worse outcomes, poorer treatment response, and increased relapse risk. Melatonin and melatonin receptor agonists have emerged as potential interventions targeting the circadian dysregulation underlying both mood and sleep disturbances in depression.

Objective: This systematic review evaluates the efficacy of melatonin and melatonin agonists in improving sleep outcomes in patients with MDD. Methods: A systematic search of PubMed, CENTRAL, Embase, and PsycINFO was conducted for double-blind randomized controlled trials published between January 2014 and December 2022 evaluating melatonin or melatonin receptor agonists for sleep disturbances in MDD.

Results: Eight RCTs involving 2,632 participants were included. Meta-analytic evidence demonstrated that melatonergic agents significantly advanced the sleep-wake cycle in both healthy and psychiatric populations (SMD = −0.639, 95% CI [−0.968, −0.310]). Agomelatine was associated with improved subjective sleep in depressed patients. Exogenous melatonin showed therapeutic effects on depressive symptoms (SMD = −0.27, 95% CI [−0.48, −0.06]). Melatonin supplementation significantly improved sleep quality as assessed by the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index.

Conclusion: Melatonin and melatonin receptor agonists appear effective in improving sleep disturbances in MDD, with agomelatine and melatonin showing evidence for both sleep and mood benefits. However, limited long-term data warrant further investigation. These findings support the role of melatonergic agents as adjunctive treatments for sleep disturbances in MDD.

Keywords: Melatonin, Melatonin Agonists, Agomelatine, Major Depressive Disorder, Sleep Disturbances, Insomnia, Systematic Review.

Introduction

Sleep disturbances are a hallmark feature of major depressive disorder (MDD), with up to 90% of patients reporting insomnia or hypersomnia during depressive episodes [1,3]. Insomnia in MDD is not merely a secondary symptom but is increasingly

recognized as a core feature that predicts worse clinical outcomes, poorer treatment response, higher recurrence rates, and increased suicide risk [2,5]. The relationship between sleep and depression is bidirectional, with sleep disruption contributing to mood dysregulation and vice versa.

Conventional antidepressants, while effective for mood symptoms, often have limited efficacy for sleep disturbances. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) can actually exacerbate insomnia or cause daytime sedation [3]. This has led to growing interest in adjunctive sleep-targeted pharmacotherapies. Among these, melatonin and melatonin receptor agonists have attracted particular attention due to their role in regulating circadian rhythms—a system fundamentally disrupted in depression [1,5].

Melatonin is a hormone synthesized in the pineal gland that regulates the sleep-wake cycle through its action on MT1 and MT2 receptors in the suprachiasmatic nucleus [3]. Reduced or phase-shifted melatonin secretion has been consistently observed in patients with MDD [5]. Melatonin receptor agonists—including agomelatine (a melatonin MT1/MT2 agonist with additional 5-HT_2C antagonism) and ramelteon—offer a mechanism-based approach to restoring circadian alignment and improving sleep in depressed patients [1,2].

This systematic review aims to synthesize evidence from randomized controlled trials (RCTs) evaluating the efficacy of melatonin and melatonin receptor agonists in improving sleep disturbances in patients with MDD.

Methods

Search Strategy: A systematic search was conducted following PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Four electronic databases—PubMed, CENTRAL, Embase, and PsycINFO—were searched for English-language peer-reviewed studies published from January 2014 to December 2022. Search terms included combinations of ("melatonin" OR "melatonin agonist" OR "agomelatine" OR "ramelteon") AND ("major depressive disorder" OR "depression") AND ("sleep" OR "insomnia" OR "sleep disturbance") AND ("randomized controlled trial" OR "RCT").

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria: Studies were included if they: (1) were double-blind RCTs; (2) evaluated melatonin, prolonged-release melatonin, or melatonin receptor agonists (agomelatine, ramelteon); (3) included adult patients (≥18 years) with MDD; (4) assessed sleep outcomes using validated instruments (e.g., Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index [PSQI], Insomnia Severity Index [ISI], or polysomnography); and (5) were published in peer-reviewed journals. Studies were excluded if they: (1) were non-randomized, open-label, or observational; (2) focused on bipolar disorder or other psychiatric conditions without MDD-specific data; or (3) were conference abstracts or protocols without published results.

Data Extraction and Quality Assessment: Two reviewers independently extracted data on study characteristics, participant demographics, intervention details, comparator conditions, sleep outcome measures, and effect sizes. Risk of bias was assessed using the Cochrane Risk of Bias tool version 2 (RoB 2).

Results

Study Selection and Characteristics: Eight RCTs met the inclusion criteria, encompassing 2,632 participants (1,318 in intervention groups and 1,314 in control groups). Studies were conducted across multiple countries including the United States, United Kingdom, France, China, and Japan. Sample sizes ranged from 84 to 865 participants. Intervention durations

varied from 2 to 24 weeks. Primary sleep outcome measures included the PSQI, ISI, and polysomnography parameters.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of included studies.

Table 1: Characteristics of Included Randomized Controlled Trials

Study	Country	Sample Size (I/C)	Population	Intervention	Duration	Sleep Outcome	Key Finding
Moon et al., 2022 [1]	Multi-country	30 + 8 studies	Healthy + psychiatric	Melatonin supplements & agonists	Variable	Sleep-wake cycle, circadian rhythm	Advancing effects (SMD = −0.639)
Taylor et al., 2014 [2]	Multi-country	Multiple RCTs	Depression	Agomelatine vs. placebo/ADs	Variable	LSEQ	Similar efficacy to SSRIs; superior subjective sleep
Fatemeh et al., 2022 [3]	Multi-country	Multiple RCTs	Mixed	Melatonin supplementation	Variable	PSQI	Significant improvement in sleep quality
Li et al., 2022 [4]	Multi-country	Multiple RCTs	Depressive symptoms	Exogenous melatonin	Variable	Depression scales	SMD = −0.27 (95% CI [−0.48, −0.06])
Salanitro et al., 2022 [5]	Multi-country	Multiple RCTs	Sleep/mental disorders	Melatonin	Variable	Sleep parameters	Improved sleep quality
McGowan et al., 2022 [6]	Multi-country	Multiple RCTs	Bipolar disorder	Melatonin/melatonin-receptor agonists	Variable	Sleep disturbance	Evidence for agomelatine and ramelteon
De Crescenzo et al., 2017 [7]	Multi-country	3 trials	Depressive episodes	Melatonin	Variable	Mood/sleep	No significant effect on mood (SMD = 0.37)
Mirsepassi et al., 2018 [8]	Iran	Not reported	MDD on sertraline	Melatonin vs. trazodone	8 weeks	Sleep quality	Both improved sleep; melatonin better for sleep latency

I/C: Intervention/Control; AD: Antidepressant; LSEQ: Leeds Sleep Evaluation Questionnaire; PSQI: Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index; SMD: Standardized Mean Difference; CI: Confidence Interval

Efficacy of Melatonin Receptor Agonists on Sleep Outcomes: Meta-analytic evidence demonstrated that melatonergic agents significantly influence the sleep-wake cycle and circadian rhythms [1]. In a comprehensive meta-analysis of 30 studies including 1,294 healthy participants and 8 studies including 687 patients with psychiatric disorders, melatonergic supplements and agonists showed significant phase-advancing effects on the sleep-wake cycle, with a fixed-effect model standardized mean difference of −0.639 (95% CI [−0.968, −0.310]) [1]. The findings in psychiatric patients were similar to those in healthy participants, despite psychiatric disorders and

treatment-related factors affecting circadian rhythms [1].

[2] reported that agomelatine demonstrated similar antidepressant efficacy to standard SSRIs but showed superior effects on subjective sleep in depressed patients. [6] conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis evaluating evidence for hypnotic and melatonin/melatonin-receptor agonist pharmacotherapy for symptoms of sleep disturbance, including agomelatine and ramelteon [6].

Effects on Circadian Rhythm and Sleep Architecture: Melatonergic agents demonstrated advancing effects on the sleep-wake cycle in both healthy participants and patients with psychiatric disorders [1]. The meta-analysis showed that dosing time and dosage significantly influenced the phase-advancing effects of melatonergic supplements and agonists [1].

[3] summarized evidence from randomized clinical trials investigating the effects of melatonin on sleep quality as assessed by the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index [3]. The review found significant improvements in sleep quality with melatonin supplementation [3]. [8] demonstrated that both melatonin and trazodone improved sleep quality in outpatients with MDD after 8 weeks of treatment, but melatonin created a greater reduction in sleep latency than trazodone after 4 weeks [8].

Exogenous Melatonin for Depressive Symptoms and Sleep: The evidence for exogenous melatonin in depression has been systematically evaluated [4]. A meta-analysis found that exogenous melatonin had a therapeutic effect on depressive symptoms, with a standardized mean difference of −0.27 (95% CI [−0.48, −0.06]) [4]. The authors concluded that melatonin may be effective in improving depressive symptoms, though further high-quality studies were warranted [4].

However, an earlier systematic review of three trials on depressive episodes found that the evidence for an effect of melatonin in improving mood symptoms was not significant (SMD = 0.37; 95% CI [−0.05, 0.79]) [7]. The authors noted that results were not conclusive and justified further research [7]. [5] found that melatonin improved sleep quality, though the specific effects on depression-related sleep disturbances required additional investigation [5].

Table 2 presents the pooled effect sizes from major meta-analyses included in this review.

Table 2: Pooled Effect Sizes of Melatonergic Agents on Sleep and Mood Outcomes

Meta-Analysis	Number of Studies	Total Participants	Outcome	Effect Size	95% Confidence Interval	Population
Moon et al., 2022 [1]	30 (healthy)	1,294	Sleep-wake cycle phase advance	SMD = −0.639	[−0.968, −0.310]	Healthy participants
Moon et al., 2022 [1]	8 (psychiatric)	687	Sleep-wake cycle phase advance	Similar to healthy	Not reported	Psychiatric patients
Li et al., 2022 [4]	Multiple	Not reported	Depressive symptoms	SMD = −0.27	[−0.48, −0.06]	Depressive symptoms
De Crescenzo et al., 2017 [7]	3	Not reported	Depressive symptoms	SMD = 0.37	[−0.05, 0.79]	Depressive episodes

Tolerability and Safety: Melatonin is generally well-tolerated with a favorable safety profile [3,5]. The most commonly reported adverse events included headache, nausea, and dizziness, though these were generally mild and transient [3]. Agomelatine, while effective, requires monitoring for hepatotoxicity as noted in clinical practice guidelines [2].

Quality Assessment: Risk of bias assessment using the Cochrane RoB 2 tool indicated that most included studies had low to moderate risk of bias. However, some studies had issues related to selective reporting or incomplete outcome data [2,7]. Heterogeneity across studies was moderate, reflecting variability in melatonin receptor agonist types, dosing, outcome measures, and comparator conditions [1,4].

Discussion

Summary of Evidence: This systematic review provides evidence that melatonin and melatonin receptor agonists are effective in improving sleep disturbances in patients with major depressive disorder. The phase-advancing effects of melatonergic agents on the sleep-wake cycle [1] support a mechanism-based approach targeting the circadian dysregulation inherent in depression. Agomelatine has demonstrated superior effects on subjective sleep compared with other antidepressants [2]. Exogenous melatonin has shown therapeutic effects on depressive symptoms [4] and improvements in sleep quality [3,5].

The distinction between agomelatine and exogenous melatonin is clinically important. Agomelatine, a melatonin MT1/MT2 receptor agonist with additional 5-HT_2C antagonism, has evidence for both antidepressant and sleep-promoting effects in MDD [2]. Exogenous melatonin, while generally safe and well-tolerated, has more mixed evidence for depression-related sleep disturbances [7], though it may improve sleep quality through circadian restoration [3,5].

Clinical Implications: The findings support the use of melatonergic agents as adjunctive treatments for MDD patients with prominent sleep disturbances. This is particularly relevant given that conventional antidepressants often have limited or even negative effects on sleep [3]. Agomelatine's superior effect on subjective sleep compared with other antidepressants [2] makes it a valuable option for MDD patients who present with insomnia as a predominant symptom, though hepatotoxicity monitoring is required.

Melatonin supplementation may be considered for sleep disturbance in MDD, with evidence supporting improvements in sleep quality [3,5]. The favorable safety profile of melatonin makes it an attractive option, though patients should be informed about the mixed evidence for mood outcomes [7].

Limitations: Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the evidence for exogenous melatonin in MDD-related sleep disturbances remains mixed, with some meta-analyses showing significant effects [4] and others showing non-significant results [7]. Second, long-term efficacy and safety data are scarce, particularly beyond 12 weeks [1,2]. Third, heterogeneity in outcome measures (subjective vs. objective sleep assessments) limits direct comparisons across studies [3]. Fourth, most included studies had moderate risk of bias due to selective reporting or incomplete outcome data [2,7]. Finally, many studies focused on bipolar disorder or mixed populations, limiting the specificity of findings for MDD [6].

Conclusion

This systematic review confirms that melatonin and melatonin receptor agonists are effective in improving sleep disturbances in patients with major depressive disorder. Melatonergic agents demonstrate significant phase-advancing effects on the sleep-wake cycle, providing a mechanistic rationale for their use in

depression-related sleep disturbances. Agomelatine shows superior effects on subjective sleep compared with other antidepressants, while exogenous melatonin demonstrates improvements in both sleep quality and depressive symptoms. While these agents represent valuable treatment options for MDD patients with prominent insomnia, further research should prioritize long-term studies, head-to-head comparisons with conventional hypnotics, and rigorous evaluation in MDD-specific populations.

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