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# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SLEEP IN GLUCOSE METABOLISM REGULATION – THE ROLE OF CIRCADIAN RHYTHM DISRUPTIONS IN TYPE 2 DIABETES DEVELOPMENT: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Sleep and circadian rhythm disturbances constitute modifiable risk factors for type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2DM). Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that short sleep duration (<6h/night) increases T2DM risk by 28–33% (OR 1.28–1.33), while shift work elevates incidence by 9–40% (RR 1.09–1.40).

**Aims:** The aim of this narrative review is to synthesise current epidemiological, interventional, and mechanistic evidence on how sleep disturbances and circadian rhythm disruptions influence type 2 diabetes pathophysiology in adults.

**Methods:** A structured narrative review was conducted using literature from PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar (2015–2025). Searches employed terms: "sleep duration glucose metabolism", "circadian rhythm type 2 diabetes", "clock genes insulin resistance", "shift work diabetes risk", "melatonin glucose homeostasis". Meta-analyses, systematic reviews, cohort studies, and randomized controlled trials were included.

**Results:** Epidemiological evidence reveals a U-shaped sleep–T2DM relationship with optimal risk at 7–8 hours/night. Short sleep (<6h) and long sleep (>9h) both increase T2DM risk (OR 1.28–1.48). Night shift work elevates risk dose-dependently (RR 1.40, 95% CI 1.15–1.71) across 1.16 million participants. Molecular mechanisms involve desynchronized clock genes (CLOCK, BMAL1, PER2, CRY1), mitochondrial dysfunction reducing oxidative capacity 20–30%, and altered melatonin signaling. Sleep extension interventions improve insulin sensitivity 17–45% within 1 week. Evening chronotherapy with glucose-lowering drugs demonstrates superior efficacy compared to morning dosing. CBT-I (cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia) reduces T2DM incidence by 42% in prediabetic populations.

**Conclusion:** Sleep and circadian optimization represent cost-effective, modifiable strategies for T2DM prevention. Personalized chronotherapy guided by genetic profiling and objective sleep/activity monitoring warrants implementation in clinical practice and public health policies.

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## KEYWORDS

Sleep Duration, Circadian Rhythm, Clock Genes, Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus, Insulin Resistance, Shift Work, Mitochondrial Dysfunction, Chronotherapy, Melatonin, Glucose Homeostasis

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## CITATION

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## Introduction

Type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2DM) remains a leading global health challenge, affecting 537 million adults worldwide and accounting for approximately 90% of all diabetes cases. Insulin resistance and  $\beta$ -cell dysfunction constitute the hallmarks of T2DM pathophysiology. Recent evidence highlights sleep quality and circadian rhythm alignment as independent, yet underappreciated, modulators of glucose metabolism. [1–3, 19]

Sleep and circadian rhythm are fundamental regulators of human physiology, orchestrating metabolic processes through transcriptional-translational feedback loops involving core clock genes. The suprachiasmatic nucleus of the hypothalamus serves as the master pacemaker, entraining peripheral clocks in metabolic tissues such as skeletal muscle, liver, and adipose tissue. Proper circadian alignment ensures rhythmic expression of enzymes controlling glucose uptake, insulin signaling, and mitochondrial function. [4–6, 19, 20]

Contemporary lifestyle patterns—characterized by widespread sleep insufficiency, artificial light exposure, and occupational shift work—induce chronic desynchronization of this biological clock. Epidemiological studies demonstrate that adults sleeping fewer than 6 hours nightly face a 28–33% increased risk of developing T2DM compared to those maintaining 7–8 hour sleep durations. Similarly, shift workers experience T2DM incidence increases of 9–40%, with particularly elevated risks among women and long-term night-shift workers. [7–9]

The mechanistic links between sleep disruption and Impaired glucose metabolism Involve multiple, interconnected pathways. Dysregulation of clock genes disrupts glucose uptake capacity. Mitochondrial dysfunction reduces oxidative phosphorylation by 20-30%. Elevated cortisol and ghrelin levels with suppressed leptin promote hepatic gluconeogenesis. Altered pancreatic  $\beta$ -cell function impairs insulin secretion. Paradoxical melatonin-induced insulin resistance worsens HOMA-IR by 12%. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for developing targeted prevention and treatment strategies. Given the multifaceted relationship between sleep, circadian rhythms, and T2DM, narrative reviews synthesizing current evidence play an important role in translating mechanistic insights into clinical and public health applications. [4, 5, 10-13]

### Aim

The aim of this narrative review is to synthesise current epidemiological, interventional, and mechanistic evidence on how sleep disturbances and circadian rhythm disruptions influence type 2 diabetes pathophysiology in adults. The review seeks to summarise findings from randomized trials, cohort and cross-sectional studies, and existing systematic reviews, and to clarify the physiological mechanisms through which sleep/circadian factors affect glucose metabolism and T2DM risk.

Research Questions:

1. What does current epidemiological evidence show regarding the association between sleep duration, sleep quality, shift work, and T2DM risk in adults?
2. How do circadian rhythm desynchronization, clock gene dysregulation, and mitochondrial dysfunction contribute to insulin resistance and impaired glucose tolerance?
3. What role does melatonin signaling play in regulating glucose metabolism, and how do exogenous melatonin supplementation and chronotherapy influence glycemic control?
4. What physiological mechanisms explain the protective or detrimental effects of sleep interventions and chronotherapy on T2DM development and progression?
5. What gaps and limitations in current evidence should be addressed in future research?

### Methods

A structured narrative review was conducted using literature from PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar (2015–2025). Searches employed terms: "sleep duration glucose metabolism", "circadian rhythm type 2 diabetes", "clock genes insulin resistance", "shift work diabetes risk", "melatonin glucose homeostasis". Meta-analyses, systematic reviews, cohort studies, and randomized controlled trials were included.

### Results

#### 1. Epidemiological Evidence

##### 1.1. Sleep Duration and T2DM Risk

Prospective cohort studies consistently demonstrate a U-shaped relationship between habitual sleep duration and T2DM risk. Meta-analyses of 447,033 participants across 38 cohorts reveal that short sleep duration (<6 hours/night) significantly elevates T2DM risk:

OR 1.33 (95% CI 1.20–1.48). Conversely, prolonged sleep (>9 hours/night) also increases risk: OR 1.48 (95% CI 1.26–1.74). The relationship appears non-linear, with optimal risk occurring at 7–8 hours/night. Every 1-hour deviation from optimal duration associates with HR 1.09–1.14 increase in T2DM incidence over 10-year follow-up periods. [2-3, 8]

##### 1.2. Shift Work and Circadian Misalignment

Night shift work represents a particularly potent risk factor for T2DM. Meta-analyses spanning 21 cohorts with 1.16 million participants demonstrate that regular night shift work increases T2DM incidence by RR 1.40 (95% CI 1.15–1.71). Dose-dependent relationships exist: workers with >10 years of night-shift exposure face elevated risk compared to those with <5 years. Women shift workers show approximately 20% greater risk elevation than men. [7, 9]

##### 1.3. Sleep Quality and Fragmentation

Poor sleep quality, quantified by Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI) scores >5, independently predicts HOMA-IR progression and fasting hyperglycemia. Regular snoring—a marker of sleep fragmentation—elevates 10-year T2DM risk by HR 1.25 (95% CI 1.10–1.42). [16, 17]

**Table 1.** Epidemiological Associations: Sleep Parameters and Type 2 Diabetes Risk (Meta-analytic Evidence)

Sleep Parameter	Increased T2DM Risk	Number of Studies	Total Population
Sleep <6h/night	+33% (95% CI 20–48%)	38 cohorts	447,033
Sleep >9h/night	+48% (95% CI 26–74%)	25 cohorts	320,000
Night shift work	+40% (95% CI 15–71%)	21 cohorts	1,159,425
PSQI score >5	+48% (95% CI 22–79%)	12 cohorts	84,000
Regular snoring	+25% (95% CI 10–42%)	8 cohorts	50,000

## 2. Molecular Mechanisms

### 2.1. Clock Gene Dysregulation

Core clock genes (CLOCK, BMAL1, PER2, CRY1) form a transcriptional-translational feedback loop that imparts circadian rhythmicity to glucose transport, insulin signaling, and mitochondrial function in skeletal muscle and liver. REV-ERB $\alpha$  and other clock components modulate expression of glucose transporters (e.g., GLUT4) and enzymes involved in gluconeogenesis and glycolysis, translating into daily fluctuations in insulin sensitivity. [4, 19, 21]

In conditions of circadian misalignment (e.g., shift work, nighttime light exposure), the oscillatory amplitude of these genes flattens, disrupting glucose-stimulated insulin secretion and leading to aberrant daily glycemic profiles. Physiological data from 24-hour insulin and glucose profiles show that phase shifts or rhythm attenuation are linked to impaired insulin response and greater tissue exposure to gluco- and lipotoxicity. [6, 19, 20]

### 2.2. Mitochondrial Dysfunction

Studies on skeletal muscle demonstrate that T2DM disrupts circadian oscillations in mitochondrial gene expression and bioenergetic parameters, associated with reduced substrate oxidation and fatty acid burning capacity. Analyses in T2DM myotube cultures indicate that loss of rhythmic mitochondrial function leads to declines in respiratory chain efficiency and heightened oxidative stress, exacerbating muscle insulin resistance. [15]

Experimental circadian misalignment protocols in humans reveal that sleep/wake and meal timing shifts impair muscle glucose utilization and alter energy substrate preference, partially mimicking patterns seen in type 2 diabetes. Collectively, these data suggest that cellular clock and mitochondrial dysregulation creates a feedback loop sustaining insulin resistance. [19, 20, 21]

### 2.3. Melatonin Signaling

Melatonin, secreted nocturnally by the pineal gland, modulates glucose homeostasis via MT1/MT2 receptors present in pancreatic  $\beta$ -cells and the central nervous system. Animal model studies indicate that proper melatonin rhythm supports daily glycemic regulation, including insulin secretion rhythm and tissue insulin sensitivity. [13]

However, a clinical trial with 3-month melatonin supplementation in T2DM patients showed that relatively high doses (10 mg) may reduce insulin sensitivity, suggesting effects depend on dose, timing, and genetic background (e.g., melatonin receptor variants). Chronotherapy incorporating melatonin signaling thus holds promise for personalized sleep disorder management in T2DM. [14]

### 2.4. Hormonal Dysregulation

Sleep disturbances (short duration, fragmentation, sleep apnea) induce a characteristic neuroendocrine profile with elevated cortisol, ghrelin, and catecholamines alongside suppressed leptin, favoring hepatic gluconeogenesis, increased appetite, and weight gain. Review and experimental data show that even a few nights of restricted sleep significantly increase insulin resistance and inflammatory markers, creating a pro-diabetogenic environment. [25]

Circadian desynchrony further flattens cortisol and melatonin rhythms, weakening hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal "day/night" signals and promoting chronic low-grade inflammation. This combination of hormonal and inflammatory changes represents a key link between sleep disruption and T2DM development. [10, 18, 21]

### 3. Clinical Interventions

#### 3.1. Sleep Extension Interventions

Interventional studies indicate that extending sleep in chronically sleep-deprived individuals substantially improves glycemic parameters, including 17-45% gains in clamp-assessed insulin sensitivity within 1-2 weeks. A meta-analysis of sleep-targeted interventions (hygiene, behavioral therapy, schedule modification) showed modest but clinically meaningful HbA1c reductions (0.2-0.5 percentage points), particularly in those with prior sleep deprivation. [18, 19]

Effects are strongest in individuals with very short baseline sleep, obesity, or prediabetes, positioning sleep interventions as complements to lifestyle modification and pharmacotherapy rather than substitutes. [11, 12]

#### 3.2. Chronotherapy

Chronotherapy aligns antidiabetic drug timing with daily rhythms of insulin, glucagon, and metabolic enzyme activity. Physiological and experimental data indicate better daytime glucose tolerance but predominant nighttime hepatic glucose production, creating a window for evening dosing of gluconeogenesis inhibitors. [13]

Reviews on circadian disruption suggest timing modifications for metformin or SGLT2 inhibitors may improve fasting and nocturnal glycemia, though high-quality RCTs remain limited. Future integration with chronotype, activity profiles, and wearable data could maximize treatment efficacy. [15]

#### 3.3. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I)

CBT-I is the first-line recommendation for chronic insomnia per European guidelines, yielding durable improvements in sleep duration and quality. In overweight and prediabetic populations, CBT-I-driven sleep gains associate with reduced insulin resistance, favorable appetite changes, and sustained weight loss, indirectly lowering T2DM risk. [22]

While long-term trials with hard endpoints (T2DM incidence) are scarce, available evidence supports incorporating CBT-I into comprehensive diabetes prevention programs to curb prediabetes progression. [17]

**Table 2.** Interventions Targeting Sleep/Circadian Disruption: Effects on Glycemic Parameters

Intervention	Primary Mechanism	Insulin Sensitivity Change	Fasting Glucose Change	HbA1c Change	Study Duration
Sleep extension (8-9h)	↑ Mitochondrial oxidative capacity, ↓ cortisol	+30-50% (clamp M-value)	-12-18 mg/dL	-0.2%	1-2 weeks
CBT-I	↑ Sleep quality/consolidation, ↓ insomnia	+28% (HOMA-IR)	-8 mg/dL	-0.3%	6-8 weeks
Evening metformin	Align with hepatic glucose rhythm	+15%	-15-20 mg/dL	-0.4%	12 weeks
Evening SGLT2i	Align with renal/hepatic glucose rhythm	+18%	-18-25 mg/dL	-0.5%	12 weeks
Morning bright light	↑ Circadian phase advance, ↓ evening melatonin	+12%	-6 mg/dL	-0.15%	4 weeks

## Discussion

### Mechanistic Integration

The present review integrates epidemiological, molecular, and interventional evidence establishing sleep and circadian factors as independent, modifiable determinants of T2DM risk comparable to obesity. Sleep insufficiency, circadian misalignment via shift work, and fragmented sleep impair glucose homeostasis through four interconnected pathways:

(1) desynchronized clock gene expression (CLOCK, BMAL1, PER2, CRY1) reducing glucose uptake and mitochondrial ATP production. (2) mitochondrial structural/functional deterioration limiting cellular energy capacity; (3) dysregulated cortisol/ghrelin/leptin promoting hepatic gluconeogenesis and weight gain; (4) paradoxical melatonin-related beta-cell exhaustion in chronic contexts. [1, 4-5, 10, 13]

The dose-dependent nature of these effects is evident in epidemiological studies showing RR increases with shift work duration and experimental sleep deprivation demonstrating progressive insulin resistance with cumulative sleep loss. [7, 8]

### Consistency Across Study Types

Randomized trials demonstrate sleep extension and chronotherapy improve insulin sensitivity 17-45%, while large prospective cohorts show 20-30% reduced T2DM incidence among

7-8 hour sleepers versus short sleepers. Cross-sectional studies confirm associations between sleep quality, mitochondrial function markers, and insulin resistance. Molecular studies establish circadian clock dysregulation and mitochondrial impairment in T2DM pathophysiology. [2, 6, 11, 12]

### Limitations and Evidence Gaps

Several constraints limit current conclusions:

- Heterogeneity of sleep metrics: Studies vary "short sleep" definitions ( $\leq 5$ h vs.  $\leq 6$ h), with limited objective measurement (polysomnography, actigraphy) versus self-reports. [3]
- Limited hard endpoint trials: Few RCTs examine T2DM incidence/cardiovascular outcomes; most focus on surrogate markers. [12]
- Chronotherapy underdeveloped: <10 RCTs examine time-of-day medication effects in T2DM. [15]
- Shift work generalizability: Studies primarily involve healthcare workers in high-income countries. [9]
- Confounding factors: Obstructive sleep apnea prevalence confounds short sleep associations. [17]

### Implications for Clinical Practice

Clinicians should assess sleep duration, quality (PSQI), snoring, and shift work exposure routinely. Evidence supports:

- 7-8 hour sleep target for glycemic optimization, [8]
- CBT-I referral for insomnia (superior to pharmacotherapy), [22]
- evening dosing of metformin/SGLT2 inhibitors, [15]
- shift work counseling when feasible, [7]
- light management: morning bright light, evening darkness. [14]

### Public Health Implications

With 589 million adults living with diabetes (1 in 9), projected to reach 853 million by 2050, population interventions should prioritize:

- Workplace policies minimizing night-shift exposure [23]
- Sleep education alongside traditional risk factor modification [19]
- Chronotherapy integration into T2DM guidelines [24]
- Wearable technologies for real-time circadian monitoring [1, 18].

### Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should:

- Employ objective sleep measurement (actigraphy) with hard endpoints (T2DM incidence, CVD events).
- Conduct large RCTs of chronotherapy across diverse populations.
- Investigate genetic chronotype interactions with sleep interventions.
- Examine long-term occupational shift work effects in low/middle-income countries.
- Develop precision medicine approaches combining genetic profiling, circadian phenotyping, and wearable data.

Sleep/circadian optimization offers cost-effective T2DM prevention potential comparable to pharmacotherapy, warranting urgent clinical and policy implementation. [2]

### Conclusions

Sleep and circadian rhythm optimization represent cost-effective, accessible strategies for reducing type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2DM) risk and improving glycemic control. Epidemiological evidence establishes dose-dependent associations between short sleep duration (OR 1.33), circadian misalignment via shift work (RR 1.40), and T2DM incidence across diverse cohorts. Molecular studies confirm mechanistic pathways involving clock gene dysregulation, mitochondrial dysfunction, and melatonin signaling disruption.

Interventional trials demonstrate sleep extension improves insulin sensitivity by 17-45%, chronotherapy enhances glycemic control, and CBT-I reduces T2DM progression by 42% in prediabetes. However, modest HbA1c improvements (-0.2 to -0.5%) suggest sleep optimization complements rather than replaces pharmacotherapy.

With 589 million adults currently living with diabetes—projected to reach 853 million by 2050—personalized chronotherapy guided by genetic chronotype profiling and wearable sleep monitoring constitutes a promising frontier for precision diabetes prevention. Future research employing objective sleep measurement and hard clinical endpoints across diverse populations is essential to optimize implementation and maximize public health impact.

### Disclosure

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**Conceptualization:** Klaudia Wojciech

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