

Long hours & shift work

Shift work & long hours can lead to a lack of sleep, meaning a greater risk of health issues. The only way to recover from tiredness is to get enough sleep – remember, what you take out of the sleep bank, you have to put back in.

Did you know?

Shift workers are 60% more likely to suffer sleep disorders.

There are periods in life when you can feel you've simply run out of time to sleep! This can occur for many reasons:

- long, irregular or unpredictable working hours
- workplace stress
- shift work
- night work
- caring for someone who is ill
- having a new baby
- stressful times, ie, death of a loved one or a relationship problem.

You may be cutting back on sleep to fit in all of life's activities, but this just adds to your sleep deficit – remember, what you take out of the sleep bank, you have to put back in. Your urge to sleep will increase in the early hours of the morning, and again at mid-afternoon.

If you're not getting enough sleep, you have a greater risk of health issues like:

- mental ill health
- obesity
- type 2 diabetes
- heart disease
- accidents.

The only way to recover from fatigue is to get adequate sleep. The average amount of sleep needed to be healthy and alert is between 7-9 hours a night.

Long work hours

- Periods of work that last longer than 8 hours are considered to be extended working hours, which can lead to getting less sleep than you need.
- Your performance will diminish noticeably after you have been awake for 16 hours.
- In fact, after having been awake for 17 hours you behave as if you have a blood alcohol level of 50mg per 100ml, and after 24 hours with 100mg per 100ml.

Note: When you drive with a blood alcohol level at the legal limit (80mg per 100ml), you are three times more likely to be involved in a crash than if you hadn't had a drink. Just think how that compares with your ability to function well at work with little or no sleep.

Shift work

- Shift work is work that starts before 8am or finishes after 6pm – or any work hours that cause a change in normal sleep patterns.
- It is one of the leading causes of fatigue.
- If you're working as a truck driver, a nurse or police officer, for example, you will at some stage be required to work when your body is naturally at rest - this disrupts your natural body clock and can lead to fatigue, physical and mental ill health and accidents (which are more common between midnight and dawn).

Shift work puts you and others at risk. Working at night has a greater impact than working the same number of hours during the day. Shift workers lose an average of 1-1.5 hours' sleep each 24 hour period. After four nights, you will have lost six hours of sleep. To compensate, you need at least 2 consecutive full nights' sleep with a normal day between.

Health dangers

While some shift workers can partially adapt to the disruption of their natural sleeping patterns, there are some who don't. The NSW Nurses Association reports 5-

10% of shift workers suffer from what is now known as Shift Work Sleep Disorder: insomnia, excessive sleepiness, headaches, irritability, reduced concentration and a lack of energy that does not reduce over time.

Research studies over the past 15 years have found shift workers have increased risks of: breast cancer, cardiovascular disease, gastro-intestinal disorders, reproductive health problems and reduced fertility.

Tips for shift workers - in the workplace

According to the Labour Department in New Zealand, there are 3 steps to managing workplace fatigue – all rely on working with your colleagues and employer to create a safe and healthy working environment.

Consultation:

Workers and employers should discuss what works for them.

Evaluation:

Workers and employers should work out how to balance different needs.

Training & education

Employers should:

- Make sure staff take regular rest breaks during shifts.
- Make food available to staff where appropriate.
- Provide good supervision of shifts.
- Be aware of the times when people are most likely to be affected by fatigue.
- Aim to manage shift work and overtime so that employees have regular opportunities for adequate recovery through high quality sleep.
- If possible allow employees longer periods off if they must sleep during the day.
- Be alert for the contribution of fatigue in accident investigations. Support staff as far as possible (and ask staff about the best way to do this).

Employees should know about:

- What to eat and when.

- The impact of caffeine and alcohol on sleep.
- How to make the most of breaks.
- How to use recovery and rest time appropriately.
- How to adjust sleeping area to promote good sleep.
- How to recognise fatigue.
- Getting to and from work safely.
- The impact of exercise on fatigue.

Source: (NZ Department of Labour, Managing shift work to minimise workplace fatigue, A guide for small businesses)

Things you can do to stay alert

- Stand up and walk when you get the chance.
- Wash your hands and wet your face.
- Listen to the radio.
- Stay cool – when you need warmth, direct it to your feet and let the fresh air in on your face.

Tips for shift workers - at home

You can also take a number of steps yourself to make shift work more bearable:

The right environment

- Let family, neighbours and friends know and understand your shift schedule.
- A happy home environment can help you cope with shift work. Make sure everyone understands what you need and work together to achieve it.
- Keep your bedroom dark and cool, with sound insulation on doors and windows if possible – switch the phone to answer machine, and lower the ring tone.
- Have a routine for waking up, just as non-shift workers have.

How to get over night shift

- Sleep only long enough after the last shift in the cycle to feel refreshed and still able to sleep later that night.
- Sleeping longer or napping can delay your adjustment to a regular, day time work sleeping pattern.

Don't forget to exercise

- Exercise can simply mean being active in general, e.g. go for a 30 minute walk around or shoot some hoops with the kids.
- Exercise every day, but avoid vigorous exercise within the last two hours before bedtime.
- Watch your diet.
- Have three meals a day, at roughly the same time every day. This can keep energy levels up, improve sleep and help your body adjust to your work schedule.
- Restrict the intake of caffeine before you go to bed.
- Healthy snacks like fruit and fruit juice, raw vegetables and cheese are very good.

Avoid sleeping pills & alcohol

- Sleeping pills can induce abnormal sleep patterns and may be addictive.
- Talk to your doctor about any sleep problems.
- Drinking alcohol before bed may disturb your sleep and require you to go the toilet more often.

Still can't sleep?!!

- Play some soft music.
- Take a bath.
- Try yoga before bed.
- Read a boring book.
- Drink a cup of chamomile or valerian tea, 1-2 hours before bed.

Learn more

[Rostering and shift work resources](#)

[Shift Work Services](#)

[Managing shift work](#)

Healthy Sleep Hygiene

BEFORE BEDTIME



Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol before bedtime



Avoid heavy meals within two hours of bedtime



Avoid energetic exercise within three hours of bedtime

GETTING READY TO SLEEP



Develop a bedtime ritual so that your body knows you are getting ready to go to sleep



Reduce extreme light, temperature, and noise in your bedroom



Include an hour of quiet time before bed such as reading, watching TV or listening to music

SLEEP TIME



Keep your sleep regular – same bedtime, same rise time. Aim for 8 hours of sleep each night.



Bedrooms are ONLY for sleep and sex
How many screens do you have in your bedroom?



If you can't sleep after 20 minutes, get up and do something boring until you feel tired, then try again.

Remember everyone has nights where they can't sleep.
The more you worry, the worse this worry can become.

If you are concerned about your sleep contact your family doctor.



Sleep Disordered Breathing Unit
Respiratory Services

