

Tips for Shift Workers

This OSACH Fast Fact is intended to help workers and employers become more aware of some of the potential problems of shift work and the actions that can be taken to reduce these problems.

When workers are required to work “irregular shifts” — not the “day” shift — it can affect their health and safety, the safety of others on the job, and relationships with family and community. Statistics Canada estimates that 30% of Canada’s workforce are involved in some type of shift work. Studies demonstrate that shift workers tend to sleep from one to four hours less than non-shift workers. As a result, they suffer more heart disease, stroke, gastric illnesses, depression and infertility than people who do not work shift work. In addition, they are more likely to fall asleep at the wheel, suffer from dips in attention, or have reduced productivity and difficulties in communication.

Circadian Rhythm

The body has its own natural daily rhythm, called the circadian rhythm. The circadian rhythm is influenced by factors such as light, dark, eating, social contacts and noise.

The body’s physical processes follow a 24-hour clock and regulate most of the body functions such as, heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature. At night, the body functions slow down to allow the body to rest and revitalize. When your “day” does not match your body’s day, problems can occur.

Develop Sleeping Rituals

Shift workers should develop a ritual before going to sleep after a night shift. This may include reading the paper, listening to music or exercising mildly (e.g., taking an outdoor walk or doing indoor calisthenics). Taking a hot bath 90 minutes before going to bed will raise your body temperature. The subsequent, gradual drop in body temperature after the bath will leave you feeling sleepy.

Set a sleep schedule and stick to it. Either go to sleep immediately after getting home or wait a while, then sleep until shortly before going to work. Don’t alternate. Naps can have a positive effect on performance and alertness and help to top-up sleep hours. Naps should not exceed two hours, to avoid confusing your body’s clock. (Naps at work should be sanctioned by your employer.)

Design the Bedroom for Sleeping

Make sure that your bedroom meets your special sleep needs. Your body’s circadian rhythm knows it’s time to sleep when it is dark and quiet; and time to get up when it is light out. Here are some tips to consider. Shift workers are notorious junk food eaters. Often this starts because proper food is not available when they are awake and ready to eat. During the night, many workplace cafeterias are closed and all that is available to the shift worker is vending machine food.

- Fool your body into letting you sleep in the day by installing blackout blinds or wearing a slumber mask. Avoid sunlight as much as possible if you head home in daylight. Consider wraparound sunglasses
- Make sure the ringer on the phone in or near the bedroom is turned off
- Ask your family to keep the noise level down. Make sure everyone in your household knows not to interrupt your sleep
- Consider wearing earplugs or using a white noise or sound machine if you find it too noisy
- Lower your thermostat before you go to bed (many people find cooler temperatures better for sleeping)
- Make sure that your bed and pillow(s) are as comfortable as possible
- Only use your bed for sleeping; refrain from using your bed to watch TV, pay bills, do work or read
- Put the lights in your bedroom on a timer to simulate sunrise

Improve Eating Habits and Patterns

Even if you usually cook for your family and friends, you may not want to be bothered making a proper meal to eat alone in the middle of the night. After all, meal times are often social occasions and it’s not the same when you are alone.

Even when proper food is available during the night, your body’s circadian rhythm may prevent proper digestion. In the middle of the night, the circadian rhythm normally puts your body in “neutral.” This means that the enzymes needed to help digest foods are not being secreted as they are during the day.

How Can You Get Around These Problems?

Plan your meal schedule to help you stay awake when you have to, and sleep when you need to. Have breakfast after sleeping, have lunch in the middle of your day, and have a light dinner just before you start your shift or several hours before going to sleep.

How Can You Get Around These Problems?

- Design your diet to be high in soluble fibre. Soluble fibre will help you to avoid stomach and bowel problems. In addition, it helps stabilize sleep. Food high in soluble fibre includes greens, raw vegetables, fruits and low fat muffins.
- As you increase your soluble fibre, be sure to increase your water intake. Everyone should drink six to eight glasses of water per day.
- Use caffeine early in your shift, if desired. Avoid caffeine altogether three hours before sleeping. Foods high in caffeine include coffee, tea, chocolate milk, chocolate bars and some medications.
- Have a lemon drink or warm milk just before going to bed. Lemon is a sleep stabilizer. Herbal teas may also be helpful.
- Avoid greasy and spicy foods and large portions during the meal just before bedtime.
- Avoid going to bed on an empty stomach as this can interfere with sleep.
- Avoid alcohol before bedtime — it may help you fall asleep faster, but you will end up having fragmented sleep.
- Eat foods high in carbohydrates just before going to work or as snacks while you are on the job. Carbohydrates are responsible for supplying energy. Foods high in carbohydrates include fruits, low-fat milk products, vegetables, cereals, pasta and legumes. Small snacks of fruit and vegetables can also help digestion and help you stay alert.
- Avoid concentrated sweets like sugars and candies; they add empty calories.

Maintain Social Contacts

Working shifts tends to alienate workers from their families. There is less time to do things together, especially if your children attend school and your spouse works opposite shifts or a regular day schedule. You and your family will have to make a special effort to spend time together. For example, during an evening shift, phone home to talk to your children and spouse before they go to bed. During a night shift, visit your family before they leave for the day and in the evening before you go to work. Create new rituals: a midnight movie if you work evenings or a breakfast date if you've worked the night shift.

Workers on rotating shifts do not have regular time off to take part in organized activities that are often in the evenings. Also, your friends may be working when you are off. Make sure they know your schedule so they will include you in social events as often as possible. Be cautious not to extend yourself so much that it interferes with your sleeping time.

Remember: When you work four to seven straight night shifts, plan for at least one full recovery day so your body can readjust to daytime living.

Exercise Regularly

A shift worker should participate in a regular exercise program. Exercise has been shown to improve mood and promote alertness. The physiological benefits of exercise will help you cope with the detrimental effects of working shifts. Also, you will meet new people who work on your shift! Many hockey arenas are available for rental 24 hours a day. Some fitness clubs may also be available for extended hours. Exercise videos are another viable option. However, remember not to exercise vigorously three to four hours before bedtime.

Solutions for the Workplace

There are a number of steps an employer can take to make life easier for the shift worker. When workers feel awake, alert and satisfied with their jobs, both safety and productivity will benefit. Here are some tips:

- Provide shift schedules and rotation to workers ahead of time
- Certain types of noise help to increase alertness and vigilance. Bright lights can help workers feel more alert
- Encourage interaction between workers
- Ensure ventilation is adequate
- Provide healthy food options that are available at all hours
- Provide other services, such as counseling and training



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LAP-190 • Rev. 03/06 • ISBN 1-895793-79-3