



Sleep Tips for Employers and Shift Workers

Sleep is essential for our physical, mental and emotional well-being. Unfortunately, in today's fast-paced, 24-hour society, it's often difficult to get the daily seven to nine hours of sleep most experts suggest. This is especially true for the estimated 15.5 million people working unconventional evening, night or rotating shifts.

Shift workers face unique challenges of alertness, performance, safety and health—all of which are affected by sleep. More specifically, according to the National Sleep Foundation, insufficient sleep has been linked to health problems including obesity and high blood pressure, negative mood and behavior and decreased productivity. Sleep deprivation can also quickly become a safety issue in the home, at work and on the road, as being overly tired makes it difficult to concentrate and increases the possibility for errors and accidents.

If workers must sleep during the day due to a work schedule, sleep is generally shorter and lighter than normal nighttime hours. Plus, while working during the night and early morning, workers are continually fighting the body's natural desire to sleep due to the natural slowing of brain and body functions. The combination of sleep loss and working during the body's low point can cause excessive fatigue and drowsiness, and a potentially hazardous situation.

What can be Done?

Important steps can be taken to improve the work/life situation of shift workers susceptible to inadequate sleep.

Suggestion for Employers:

Employers can adapt practices to make their workplace safer and more productive for the shift worker. A few suggestions:

- Offer adequate lighting, fresh air, proper heat and air conditioning in work areas.
- Provide access to nutritious and appealing foods through cafeteria or vending services.
- Consider work schedule features such as time of shift, shift rotations (permanent, rotating speed and direction) and work-rest ratios. Schedule shifts to offer adequate breaks and days off. Plan sufficient time between shifts, enabling employees to get enough sleep and attend to personal lives.
- If possible, scheduling heavy or dangerous work at times of peak performance, not in the middle of the night or during early morning hours.
- Provide training or awareness programs for new shift workers and their families to discuss the inherent challenges of shift work. Implement a sleep wellness program. Educate employees about sleep issues and managers to recognize fatigue indicators in their employees and keep the lines of communication open.
- Communicate the importance of safe driving to and from work. Encourage use of carpools, public transportation, driving with a rested driver, taxis, etc.
- Examine a napping policy, providing a sleep friendly space and time for scheduled employee naps.



Suggestions for Shift Workers:

At Work...

- Take short breaks during a shift. Exercise if possible, i.e. walk, climb stairs, etc.
- Don't leave the most tedious or boring tasks to the end of a shift, a time you may be most tired.
- Commit to eating healthy, even at work. Carefully plan meals. An unconventional schedule may contribute to tendencies to eat the wrong foods, consume them too quickly and eat at irregular times.
- Communicate with co-workers. Talking can help keep you awake. Colleagues can also help watch for signs of drowsiness.
- Exchange ideas with co-workers—especially shift work veterans—for coping with shift work issues.
- If possible, carpool or take public transportation for safe travel.

At Home...

- Follow a regular sleep schedule, even on days off and weekends. Make sure that family, friends and neighbors understand your shift schedule and ask them to maintain a quiet and peaceful environment during your sleep time.
- Consider products to help create a comfortable, dark and quiet sleep situation, i.e. good mattress, earplugs, sleep mask, dark blinds or curtains, sleep-inducing audiotapes, or fan or air conditioner to mask other disruptive noises.
- Before sleep don't eat too much (or too little) and avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol.
- Try moderate exercising before going on shift (too much before work may be tiring). If exercising before bed, do so at least three hours before sleep.
- Develop a relaxing bedtime routine to help you unwind (i.e. a hot tub or bath.)

Tips adapted from National Sleep Foundation and National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

If sleep becomes a problem on a regular basis, it may be related to your sleep habits and should be discussed with your doctor or other health care provider. Be prepared to identify specific sleep problems and how they affect you, day and night.

For additional information: National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Plain Language About Shiftwork, <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/pdfs/97-145.pdf> National Sleep Foundation, <http://www.sleep-foundation.org> National Safety Council, <http://www.nsc.org/groups/members/articles/index.cfm>.

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