



## WORKPLACE HEALTH AND WELLNESS "Shift Work"

**Information Sheet**  
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Shift work covers a wide variety of work schedules and implies that work periods rotate or change according to a set schedule. These shifts can be either continuous, running 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, or semi-continuous, running 2 or 3 shifts per day with or without weekends. Also, the length of a shift can vary between 8 and 12 hours and can also include extended hours of work.

Many workers find that shift work disrupts their family and personal life and leads to health problems including chronic fatigue, gastrointestinal and cardiovascular disorders. Shift work at night can upset one's circadian rhythm (24-hour body cycle). On the other hand, some workers prefer shift work because it usually allows for more free time.



Many human physical functions follow a daily rhythm or a 24-hour cycle known as circadian rhythm. Sleeping, waking, digestion, secretion of adrenalin, body temperature, blood pressure, pulse and many other important aspects of body functions and human behaviour are regulated by this 24-hour cycle. Normally, the body uses cues from its processes and from the environment such as clock time, social activities, the light/dark cycle, and meal times to keep the various functions on track. However, for a person working at night, these body rhythms get out of sync or out of phase with the person's activity pattern, leading to feelings of fatigue and disorientation. "Jet lag" is a term often used to describe these feelings.

Some rhythms adapt in two to three days while others change only after longer periods. People adapt to new schedules at different rates as do the different rhythms. Total reversal of circadian rhythms may never occur because on days off most people go back to a "normal" day schedule. Frequent changes in schedule and disruption to circadian rhythms can lead to chronic fatigue and other health problems. The disturbance of circadian rhythms can affect concentration, motivation, and reaction time, particularly at night. This combination can result in an increased risk of accident and injury.

Disruption of both the quality and quantity of normal sleep is inevitable in shift work, particularly where night work is involved. Daytime sleep is seldom as deep or as refreshing as sleep at night. Even when disturbances are removed, a worker who returns home in the morning may still find sleep impossible or less refreshing. Being constantly tired is a typical complaint of shift workers. Gastrointestinal and digestive problems such as indigestion, heartburn, stomachache and loss of appetite are more common among rotating shift workers and night workers than among day workers. At night, the loss of appetite often leads to increased snacking on "junk" food rather than eating a full, well-balanced meal. Feelings of fatigue may encourage the consumption of beverages with caffeine (coffee, cola) to help the worker stay awake.

### What can be done to reduce the risks associated with shift work?

#### Employers:

- Design optimum shift schedules (shorter rotation versus longer rotation, most demanding work early in the shift).
- Rotate shifts forward from day to afternoon to night - circadian rhythms adjust better when moving ahead than back.
- Avoid early morning shifts (start times as early as 5 or 6 AM).
- Provide a rest period of at least 24 hours after each set of night shifts and time off such as weekends whenever possible.
- Inform shift workers of their work schedules well ahead of time so they and their families and friends can plan activities.
- Keep schedules as simple and predictable as possible but be as flexible as possible for shift changes.

#### Shift Workers:

- Maintain regular eating patterns as much as possible and eat balanced, varied meals.
- Avoid greasy foods, salt caffeine and alcohol, particularly at night. Try crackers and fruit instead of pop and candy bars.
- Relax during meals and allow time for digestion and try to incorporate regular exercise into your schedule.
- Make time for quiet relaxation before bed for a better sleep (read a book or listen to quiet music on the radio for a while).
- Have a comfortable, dark, quiet place to sleep during the day.
- Avoid working excessive overtime.

#### Do you want to know more?

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