

Lifestyle tips for Shift Workers

HEALTH
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- going to sleep.
- Don't go to bed feeling hungry: have a light meal or snack before sleeping but avoid fatty, spicy and/or heavy meals, as these are more difficult to digest and can disturb sleep.
- Avoid alcohol as it lowers the quality of sleep.

DIET / NUTRITION

It is very important to consider the timing and quality of your meals. Digestive problems are common in shift workers due to disruption of the body clock and poor diet. Plan your meals to help you stay alert at work and to relax/sleep when you need to rest.

- Regular light meals/snacks are less likely to affect alertness or cause drowsiness than a single heavy meal.
- Choose foods that are easy to digest such as pasta, rice, bread, salad, fruit, vegetables, and milk products.
- Avoid fatty, spicy and/or heavy meals as these are more difficult to digest. They can make you feel drowsy when you need to be alert. They may also disturb sleep when you need to rest.
- Avoid sugary foods, such as chocolate – they provide a short-term energy boost followed by a dip in energy levels.
- Fruit and vegetables are good snacks as their sugar is converted into energy relatively slowly and they also provide vitamins, minerals, and fibre.
- Drink plenty of fluid as dehydration can reduce both mental and physical performance but avoid drinking too much fluid before sleeping as this may overload the bladder.

STIMULANTS AND SEDATIVES

Shift workers often turn to stimulants such as coffee or cigarettes to keep them awake and sedatives such as alcohol or sleeping pills to help them sleep. **Try to avoid such aids** as they only have short-term effects on alertness as tolerance to their effects develops. Persistent use may also increase the risk of dependence.

- Caffeine is a mild stimulant present in coffee, tea, and cola as well as in tablet form and in special 'energy' drinks. It can improve reaction time and feelings of alertness for short periods. Only use caffeine occasionally and don't rely on it to keep you awake. If you do decide to take caffeine or

other stimulants, you should consider what might happen when its effects wear off e.g., when you are operating machinery or driving.

- Avoid the use of alcohol to help you fall asleep. Although alcohol can promote the onset of sleep it is also associated with earlier awakenings, disrupted sleep and poorer sleep quality. Regularly drinking too many increases the risk of long-term damage to your physical and mental health, your work, social and personal relationships.
- Regular use of sleeping pills and other sedatives to aid sleep are not recommended because they can lead to dependency and addiction.
- New drugs have recently been developed that can alter our state of alertness. Although their use may be widespread abroad, the ways in which they work, and their long-term effects are not yet fully understood and consequently their use is not advised unless under medical supervision.

PHYSICAL FITNESS AND A HEALTHIER LIFESTYLE

An unhealthy lifestyle combined with shift work may increase the likelihood of sleep disorders and sleep loss or exacerbate existing sleep problems. A good diet, regular meals and exercise can improve sleep quality, health, and well-being.

- You can improve your fitness by spending 30 minutes a day on a physical activity including housework and walking. Consider joining the work gym and taking part in a regular exercise classes.
- Eat healthy meals on a regular basis.
- Cut down or give up smoking.
- Reduce your alcohol intake.
- Seek advice from your doctor if you require regular medication such as insulin for diabetes or suffer from a chronic condition such as epilepsy.

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FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Working shifts that differ from the routines of friends and family can leave you feeling isolated, and it is important to make the effort not to lose contact with them:

- Talk to friends and family about shift work. If they understand the problems, you are facing it will be easier for them to be supportive and considerate.
- Make your family and friends aware of your shift schedule so they can include you when planning social activities.
- Make the most of your time off and plan mealtimes, weekends, and evenings together.
- Plan your domestic duties around your shift schedule and try to ensure that you do not complete them at the cost of rest/sleep. You may need to change the times/days when some jobs are done.
- Invite others who work similar shifts to join you in social activities when others are at work and there are fewer crowds.

WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR ALERTNESS AT WORK

On some shifts, such as nights and very early mornings you may find it difficult to remain alert and this can affect your performance. It may also increase the risk of errors, injury, and accidents. You may find it helpful to:

- Take moderate exercise before starting work which may increase your alertness during the shift.
- Keep the light bright.
- Take regular short breaks during the shift if possible.
- Get up and walk around during breaks.
- Plan to do more stimulating work at the times you feel most drowsy.
- Keep in contact co-workers as this may help both you and them stay alert.