

# Nutrition for Shift Workers

HEALTH  
HUB



It is hard to manage health, productivity and achieve your personal best weight with today's demanding work and family life commitments, landscape of unhealthy convenience foods and short window of time to fit in enough sleep and physical activity.

Throw in the additional stressors of shift work and the challenge can become even bigger.

Shift work means working outside the usual 7 am - 6 pm time. You may find that eating healthy can be a challenge. Here are some practical tips to help make your workday healthier.

## WHY ARE HEALTHY EATING HABITS SO ESSENTIAL FOR SHIFT WORK?

Shift workers have been shown to:

- Have a higher risk of sleep loss, obesity, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes.
- Have more digestive issues (nausea, heartburn, constipation, and diarrhoea).
- Struggle with depression, stress, and relationship issues.
- Have a higher risk of drug and alcohol addictions and safety issues such as accidents and injury.
- Suffer with more fatigue, lower concentration, and reduced productivity.
- Trouble falling asleep or getting a good night's sleep.

It is no surprise that nutritious meals and snacks influence many of the above challenges quite significantly.

Outside of taking personal responsibility for your

nutrition at work, employers should take interest too. Improperly fuelled employees have a direct connection to productivity, safety and wellness and can therefore influence the bottom line.

The most common shift work professions that may benefit from added workplace wellness and safety support include:

- Production, transportation, and material moving (mechanics, repairers, construction workers, machine operators, truck drivers, assemblers, inspectors, and equipment cleaners).
- Technical, sales and administration (salespersons, retail workers and administrative support).
- Managerial and professional (executives, computer scientists and teachers).
- Protective services (emergency medical services workers, police, and firefighters).
- Healthcare services (residents and on-call physicians and nurses).
- Other services (healthcare support, food, cleaning, personal and private household).

## HOW MIGHT SHIFT WORK INFLUENCE HEALTH, PRODUCTIVITY, AND WEIGHT?

The main reasons shift work may be bad for your health are:

### It can influence our biology -

- Influences our circadian rhythm, which is the physical, mental, and behavioral changes that take place in a 24-hour period which are tied to lightness and darkness.
- If you disrupt the circadian rhythm, it can disrupt our overall energy level, metabolism, digestion, cardiovascular system, hormones, and immunity.

### It often impacts our lifestyle habits -

- Habit formation is hard when your schedule constantly changes.
- It is also difficult to keep track of what and how much food is eaten with a fluctuating schedule and changing appetite/sleep schedule.
- Grocery shopping, cooking and meal preparation changes dramatically, often not for the better.
- Shift work can also be isolating and a challenge to participate in social activities, family meals and scheduled physical activity.

## WHAT ARE THE TOP NUTRITION STRATEGIES THAT CAN HELP SHIFT WORKERS?

Examining nutrition is one of the most critical strategies that will influence the health, productivity, and weight management of shift workers. Here are some top strategies to get started:

### 1. Plan an eating schedule for each of your shifts.

Plan to eat within one hour of waking and then schedule smaller meals and snacks every 3-5 hours until you go to bed. This will mean that for most people they will eat between 3-6 times per day.

For example, if your shift is 11pm to 7am and you wake up at 4pm then your eating schedule may look something like this:

- By 5pm Wake-up Meal
- 8-10 pm Pre-shift Meal
- 12-2 am Work Snack
- 4-6 am Work Meal
- 7-8 am Bedtime Snack

Obviously keep check on the total calories consumed and ensure that they are not going over your Daily Calorie Recommendations for your physical activity levels.

### 2. Ensure meals have both good carbohydrates AND protein.

Carbohydrates provide the brain and muscles with energy while protein is key for satiety and fullness. Balance your meals with 3 things (grains/starches, veggies/fruits, and a source of protein). Balance your snacks with at least 2 things (veggies/fruits/grains/starches and a source of protein).

### 3. Curb caffeine in the middle of your shift.

Caffeine can stay in your system for as long as eight hours, so decrease coffee, tea, and other caffeine sources from the middle of your shift onward. To cut down on caffeine switch to decaffeinated tea or coffee, or herbal teas.

### 4. Watch your alcohol intake.

Despite alcohol initially making you sleepy, it can hinder you entering the deep restorative stages of sleep.

### 5. Avoid large meals late into your shift.

Taking in lots of food and fluid before bed can cause

indigestion and make it difficult to fall asleep, as well as cause you to wake up to urinate frequently at night.

### 6. Don't go to bed starved.

If you are chronically dieting, carb deprived and simply not eating enough, your sleep will be disturbed. Keeps tabs on the total calories consumed throughout the day based on your physical activity levels. If you are too low, it isn't sustainable. Seek help from a Registered Dietitian to create a food plan that achieves a good balance of nourishment for health and achievement of your personal best weight.

### 7. Pack healthy meals and snacks.

Bringing healthy meals and snacks from home will make it easier to eat well on your shift. Include a variety of foods that include plenty of vegetables and fruits, whole grains, and foods high in protein.

### 8. Avoid high fat, fried or spicy foods.

To prevent indigestion or 'heartburn' eat lower fat foods that are not fried or too spicy.

### 9. Skip sweet snacks.

Foods high in sugar, such as a chocolate bar or soft drink, may give you a short burst of energy, but can leave you feeling sluggish later. A snack with a little protein will provide energy when you start to feel tired and hungry. Try a handful of nuts with fruit, hummus with vegetable sticks, yogurt with berries or make your own granola bars or energy balls.

### 10. Drink more water.

Drink plenty of water to prevent dehydration. It may help you to feel more alert during your shift. Keep a reusable water bottle close by and drink regularly during your shift.

### 11. Take active breaks / exercise.

Do some stretches during your break. Walk up a flight of stairs or go for a brisk walk. Being active at work will give you energy to finish your shift, improve your mood and help you sleep better. You could try joining the work fitness facility. With the gym being onsite it makes it easier for you to get exercise in before or after your shift, saving time and money.