



Shift Work and Sleep

A shift worker is anyone who follows a work schedule that is outside of the typical "9 to 5" business day. In the past few decades the United States has become increasingly dependent upon shift workers to meet the demands of globalization and our 24-hour society. From a competitive standpoint, shift work is an excellent way to increase production and customer service without major increases in infrastructure.

However, while shift work does create potential productivity advantages, it also has many inherent risks. Some of the most serious and persistent problems shift workers face are frequent sleep disturbance and associated excessive sleepiness. Sleepiness/fatigue in the work place can lead to poor concentration, absenteeism, accidents, errors, injuries and fatalities. Managers and policy makers who are responsible for writing and enforcing rules regarding employee work hours must address the specific issues of a 24-hour work force in order to succeed and benefit from such a labor force.

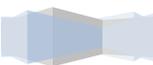
Shift workers are also at an increased risk for a variety of chronic illnesses such as cardiovascular and gastrointestinal diseases. Shift workers also often miss out on important family and social events due to their work schedules. Most managers recognize that understanding and addressing these issues improves employee morale, performance, safety and health, and can dramatically improve the bottom line of the company.

SYMPTOMS

The main complaint for people with shift work sleepiness is excessive fatigue along with insomnia, disrupted sleep schedules, reduced performance, difficulties with personal relationships and irritability/depressed mood.

TREATMENT

According to the International Classifications of Sleep Disorders, shift work sleep disorder is a circadian rhythm sleep disorder. Circadian rhythm refers to the 24 hour rhythmic output of the human biological clock. It is considered a disorder because of the frequency with which people suffer from sleep disturbance and excessive sleepiness in trying to adapt to a shift work schedule. Unfortunately, treatment for shift work sleep disorder is limited. Both behavioral and pharmacological remedies can help alleviate symptoms. Some research indicates that the body may never fully adapt to shift work, especially for those who switch to a normal weekend sleep schedule.



If you are a shift worker and have difficulty sleeping during the day, chances are you also have difficulty staying awake at work. Also, the more sleepy/fatigued you are, the more likely you are to experience a "microsleep," an involuntary bout of sleep brought on by sleep deprivation that lasts for a few seconds.

Here are some tips for staying alert on the job:

- Avoid long commutes and extended hours.
- Take short nap breaks throughout the shift.
- Work with others to help keep you alert.
- Try to be active during breaks (e.g., take a walk, shoot hoops in the parking lot, or even exercise).
- Drink a caffeinated beverage (coffee, tea, colas) to help maintain alertness during the shift.
- Don't leave the most tedious or boring tasks to the end of your shift when you are apt to feel the drowsiest. Night shift workers are most sleepy around 4-5 a.m.
- Exchange ideas with your colleagues on ways to cope with the problems of shift work. Set up a support group at work so that you can discuss these issues and learn from each other.

For some shift workers, napping is essential. It can be extremely effective at eliminating fatigue-related accidents and injuries and reducing workers compensation costs. Although most employers do not allow napping in the workplace, a ban on napping may soon prove to be a legal liability. Thus, efforts to make workplace policies nap-friendly may soon gain popularity as the issue increases in global significance.

Here are some tips for sleeping during the day:

- Wear dark glasses to block out the sunlight on your way home.
- Keep to the same bedtime and wake time schedule, even on weekends.
- Eliminate noise and light from your sleep environment (use eye masks and ear plugs).
- Avoid caffeinated beverages and foods close to bedtime.
- Avoid alcohol; although it may seem to improve sleep initially, tolerance develops quickly and it will soon disturb sleep.

Although addressing these issues may require some investment up front for training and other measures, the bottom line is that improved sleep in workers may lead to improved productivity in your company.

For assistance in educating your employees about the consequences of sleep deprivation, contact Sharon Rateike, corporate wellness program coordinator at (920) 568-5018 or Sharon.Rateike@forthc.com.

