

Sleep strategies for shift workers

Different people cope with shift work in different ways and there is no one perfect approach. Our age, fitness, health, lifestyle and home responsibilities can all have an impact on the way we manage. Some people adapt better than others, however it is possible to alter our behaviour or make lifestyle changes that may make shift work easier to manage.

Many industries employ shift workers – health, manufacturing, transport and logistics, emergency services, hospitality, mining and resources to name just a few. Some of the most persistent issues shift workers face relate to sleep patterns, sleep disturbance, irritability/depressed mood, difficulties with personal relationships, and reduced performance. Getting sufficient good quality sleep is important for safety, productivity and health.

How do I create an effective sleep schedule?

Most adults need 7-9 hours of sleep a day. If you are unable to achieve that level of sleep, you should still try to rest as that is beneficial for your health.

- ◆ Try using a diary to record your sleep patterns and any challenges you face as this may help you understand when you feel most tired
- ◆ If you work regular shifts, try going to bed at different times e.g. shortly after you get home from work, or stay up for a period and sleep before your next shift to identify what works best for you
- ◆ Try having a short sleep before your first night shift
- ◆ When you are coming off a period of night shifts, have a short sleep and then go to bed earlier that night
- ◆ Once you have identified a sleep schedule that works for you, try to stick with it

What can I do to promote sleep?

The best way to promote sleep is to follow a routine that helps your body prepare for sleep. Some suggestions to help you to relax and promote sleep include:

- ◆ Avoid alcohol as it lowers the quality of your sleep
- ◆ Avoid caffeine, energy drinks and other stimulants a few hours before bedtime
- ◆ Avoid vigorous exercise before sleep as it is stimulating and raises your body temperature
- ◆ Avoid going to bed hungry – have a light meal or snack but avoid fatty, spicy or heavy meals
- ◆ Avoid using laptops, mobile phones or other screen viewing for an hour or two before going to bed
- ◆ Go for a short walk, relax with a book, listen to music or take a hot shower
- ◆ Create an environment that is conducive to sleep

How do I create an environment that helps me to sleep?

Sleep loss and fatigue can be issues for shift worker so creating the best environment for success is important. Daytime sleep is usually lighter, shorter and of lower quality than night-time sleep. It can be disturbed due to warmer temperatures and daytime noise. Try to implement the following strategies:

- ◆ Use your bedroom only for sleep and intimacy – avoid working, watching television or eating in your bedroom
- ◆ If your environment is noisy consider using earplugs or some low volume background music or white noise to assist
- ◆ Ask those who live with you not to disturb your sleep time and to keep noise to a minimum while you are sleeping and resting
- ◆ Use blackout blinds, heavy curtains or eye shades to darken the room
- ◆ Keep the bedroom temperature to a comfortable level and remember that cool conditions improve your sleep
- ◆ Keep your bedroom technology free – and if you can leave your mobile phone in another room or turn it to silent

What about staying alert at work?

If you have difficulty sleeping while you are at home, you may also have difficulty staying awake at work. The sleepier you are, the more likely you are to experience a microsleep which is an involuntary bout of sleep that lasts for a few seconds. Try these tips to stay alert on the job:

- ◆ Have some moderate exercise before starting work to increase your alertness
- ◆ Be active during your breaks – take a walk, do some stretches, or other activity
- ◆ Plan to do more stimulating work and tasks when you are likely to feel the drowsiest. Night shift workers are most likely to feel sleepy around 4am to 5am
- ◆ Keep the light as bright as possible in your work environment
- ◆ Try drinking a caffeinated beverage such as coffee or tea if they help you to maintain alertness
- ◆ Work with your colleagues to help each other to stay alert and share ideas with your colleagues on ways to manage shift work or set up a support group to discuss the issues and ideas and learn from each other

Working shifts that differ from the routines of your friends and family may leave you feeling isolated. It is important to keep contact with family and friends and to help them understand how they can support you. During your time off, plan activities with your family and friends so you can participate as much as possible.

If you need coaching or support to improve your sleep, our team are here to help. Call us at any time.