

Shiftwork and Extended Hours

Shiftwork and shifts with extended hours refer to any non-standard work schedule. The traditional eight-hour day between 7am and 6pm has changed dramatically and many people now regularly work evening and night and/or extended hours.

Studies show that shiftwork and shifts with extended hours can have significant adverse effects on health, workplace accident rates, absenteeism and a worker's social life.

What are the health effects of shiftwork?

Partial sleep deprivation is the main problem that affects the health of shift workers.

Night work disturbs the circadian rhythm in the human body. This is an internal body clock that is synchronised to a 24-hour period. It regulates a number of physiological functions such as body temperature, hormone secretion, heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, digestion and mental alertness. It lets us know, among other things, when to sleep and when to eat. The disruption of this internal clock can result in health problems. For example, shiftworkers and extended hour workers suffer from sleep disturbances and the physiological consequences that result from it. The social effects extend to their family and friends.

Researchers have found several negative health effects in shiftworkers and workers on extended hours. Some of these are:

- Increased heart disease
- Gastric ulcers and gastro intestinal problems
- Social problems and minor psychiatric disorders
- Increased absenteeism
- Sleep disorders and increased fatigue
- Increased error rates and accident rates.

Some personal factors can make workers more susceptible to problems when doing shiftwork or extended hours. These include:

- Heavy domestic work load
- Psychiatric illness

- A history of alcohol or drug abuse
- Epilepsy
- Diabetes
- Heart disease

How employers can address shiftwork problems

There are a number of steps that employers can take to address the problems faced by shift workers. Some of the solutions suggested for employers are:

- Improve the workplace lighting, canteen and recreation facilities.
- Ensure workers undertake no more than two consecutive night shifts.
- Ensure workers undertake no more than two or three consecutive 12 hour shifts.
- Ensure an even distribution of days off with shift blocks.
- Avoid compacting shifts to produce longer breaks.
- Allow workers time for breaks, time to move around and time to interact with other workers.
- Ensure job rotation by moving employees to different tasks or responsibilities.
- Educate workers on lifestyle advice such as eating and sleeping patterns.

In addition, shift workers should have the same access as day workers to services such as counselling and the same opportunities for participating in training and meetings. Workplace safety committee meetings should also be scheduled for those on evening and night shifts.

Tips for workers

Shiftworkers can also take a number of steps to make living with shiftwork more bearable.

It is important to set up good conditions for sleep

Family, neighbours and friends need to know and understand the shift schedule.

The bedroom must be dark and cool. Heavy curtains and sound insulation on the doors and windows can reduce noise levels. An air conditioner can mask minor noises from outside.

An answering machine for the phone and lowering the ring tone may also be helpful.

There should be a routine for waking up as well, just as there is for the average day-worker.

Night-shift workers should exercise

Exercising is not an easy task because shift workers usually start the day exhausted and pressed for time.

However, exercise can simply mean being active in general; for example, a walk around the neighbourhood for only half an hour or a game of backyard soccer with the children.

Exercise should be a part of every day, but vigorous exercise should be avoided within the last two hours before bedtime.

Diet is very important

Shift workers should have three meals a day, at roughly the same time every day. The timing of meals can keep energy levels up, improve sleep and help the body adjust to the shiftwork schedule.

Restrict the intake of caffeine not only in coffee and tea, but in soft drinks too.

Healthy snacks like fruit and fruit juice, raw vegetables and cheese are very good at home or at work.

Family understanding and cooperation is crucial

Stress seems to be a common problem in shiftworkers' lifestyle and a good home environment can help reduce stress.

Useful hints to apply during shift work

- When the work is sedentary, contact others on the same shift regularly; it may help to keep alert.
- Stand up and walk occasionally.
- Go to the toilet and wash your hands and wet your face.
- Be aware of fatigue after the shift is over, especially while driving home.
- Keep your mind active by listening to the radio.
- Avoid the heater - in winter, it is better to direct warmth to the feet and open the window a little to let fresh air in on your face.

Useful references

Hints for Shiftworkers Division of Workplace Health and Safety, Queensland

Shiftwork and Health. A literature review and practical approach to shiftwork roster redesign Mathen D. (University of Sydney, 1993)

Living With Shiftwork Ontario Natural Resources Safety Association (ONRSA, Canada, 1996)

Guidelines for Shiftworkers Wedderburn, A. (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Dublin, 1991)

How to manage shiftwork (1997) and *Shiftwork: How to devise an effective roster* (1997) WorkCover NSW

For further information and advice contact the Workers Health Centre



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