

Shift work disorder



Generally, the body is programmed to sleep best overnight and to be most alert during the day.

But what about shift workers?

Fixed night work creates challenges for employees who can struggle to sleep during the day due to light, noise and other distractions and experience excessive sleepiness when awake. Rotating shifts can exacerbate these issues.

A sleep specialist can help with treatments and strategies to promote sleep.



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Shift Work & Sleepiness



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SHIFT WORK

We live in a highly connected globalised world with many people working at different times of the day and night. About 20 percent of people in industrialised countries engage in shift work. Research shows that shift work that includes night work can have a negative impact on health, sleep, performance and risk of accidents.

HOW CAN SHIFT WORK AFFECT SLEEP?

Sleepiness and sleep disturbance are common consequences of overnight work. Sleepiness during the night shift can be noticeable and can lead to problems with fatigue and falling asleep. Research shows that shift workers tend to sleep less than day workers and report disturbed sleep. The average sleep duration for night shift workers is about 5-6 hours, which is less than the recommended hours per night. We also know that people with existing sleep disorders, such as insomnia, report worse sleep and insufficient sleep when engaged in shift work.

SHIFT WORK DISORDER

Sleep disturbance is highly prevalent in shift workers and when people experience clinically significant impairment from a lack of sleep this can cause shift work disorder (SWD). It affects about 10 percent of shift workers but maybe higher. To be diagnosed with SWD an individual will have:

- (i) an insomnia or sleepiness complaint that causes a reduction in the total amount of sleep;
- (ii) the symptoms are associated with shift work and persist for at least three months;
- (iii) problems with circadian and sleep times that are confirmed using a sleep diary or actigraphy monitoring for seven days or more, and;
- (iv) a sleep disturbance that is not explained by other sleep disorders, medical or neurological disorders, mental disorders, medication use or substance use disorder.

DOES SHIFT WORK CAUSE INCREASED TIREDNESS?

Shift workers often report increased tiredness, associated with the shifts and away from work. This tiredness and fatigue causes reductions in concentration and alertness during work, especially night shifts. In addition, the negative consequences of disturbed sleep and increased tiredness can lead to accidents and research shows that:

- 17-19 hours without sleep is equivalent to having a blood alcohol content of 0.05 percent; and
- this is further exacerbated when sleep loss is longer, with 24 hours without sleep equivalent to having a blood alcohol content of 0.08 percent.

WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN?

There is a sophisticated interaction between the coordination of sleep and circadian systems in the brain. This means that the circadian system keeps you alert during the day and asleep during the night. When we work at night, this disrupts these processes and people can have trouble sleeping during the day and keep alert at night.

WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

The most logical thing that people can do if they experience excessive sleepiness associated with shift work is to stop undertaking night shifts. However, this is not always practical, and people need to be aware of how to manage sleep when engaging in shift work.

The most important aspect would be to ensure that you have enough time for sleep. This can be achieved using the following suggestions:

- Whatever the shift pattern, try to get enough sleep every day and keep a regular sleep routine.
- Ensure that your bedroom is conducive to sleep. This means keeping the bedroom cool and dark with adequate ventilation.
- Try to keep the external noise to a minimum to facilitate sleep. Remove mobile telephones (if

possible) from the bedroom and use features in the bedroom to absorb noise, such as carpets.

- Wearing ear plugs and eye covers can aid sleep in some shift workers.
- Avoid caffeine, sleeping pills, alcohol or cigarettes before going to bed.
- Take a nap before going to work, prior to a later or night shift.
- Some workers are allowed to take a break during their shift. This time can be used for a short nap.

WHAT CAN YOUR EMPLOYER DO ABOUT IT?

There are health and safety guidelines that employers must adhere to.

There are other measures that can help, such as:

- avoiding scheduling back-to-back shifts. After working double or triple shifts, the problems only get worse and safety will be reduced. The rotating shifts where one delays their onset of start time works better with the circadian rhythm. The body clock prefers the Earlies-Lates-Nights rotation rather than the advancing rotation, i.e. Nights-Lates-Earlies;
- scheduling the heaviest work that requires most concentration during day shifts; and
- scheduling breaks during night shifts - this allows tired workers to take a nap.

HOW LONG SHOULD A NAP DURING A BREAK BE?

Fifteen minutes is best, avoid napping for any longer. When driving, pull over to a quiet spot and put the seat back. After the nap, walk around for at least five minutes to wake up properly before resuming other activities.

I AM HAVING PROBLEMS WITH MY SLEEP, WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Talk to your GP who may refer you to a sleep specialist.

To find out more, go to www.woolcock.org.au/clinic.