

Reduce accidents caused by shift worker fatigue

This Technical Update is the first in a two-part series on shift worker fatigue.

Over twenty million Americans are shift workers. That is, they work outside the regular daytime working hours (approximately 7 a.m. to 6 p.m.). These workers are often tired and sleepy because of their work schedules. Consequently, they have difficulty concentrating and are more likely to make mistakes and have accidents on the job.

According to a report by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), working at night makes it difficult to get enough sleep. Sleep after a night shift is usually shorter and less refreshing than sleep during regular nighttime hours. The body is fighting against its normal circadian rhythms (or biological clock) which cause the body and brain functions to slow down at night. The combination of sleep loss and working at the body's low-point can cause excessive fatigue and sleepiness.

What can employers do?

NIOSH offers the following suggestions:

Improve work schedules—Employers can make changes to improve employees' work schedules. Employers should consider alternatives to permanent night shifts, keep consecutive night shifts to a minimum, avoid quick shift changes (less than 10 hours between shifts on the same day), and minimize long shifts and overtime. Employers can also evaluate rest breaks to determine if they are long enough for

workers to recover from fatigue. Employers might consider implementing flexible start and end times to help workers with child care arrangements or to avoid rush hour commutes.

Distribute workload—To reduce the risk of accidents, avoid scheduling the heaviest or most dangerous work in the middle of the night or in early morning hours. Also avoid scheduling heavy or dangerous work at the end of a 12-hour shift.

Provide an adequate work environment—Provide bright lighting, clean air, proper heat and air conditioning, and reduced noise to reduce the stress of shift work. Shift workers should have access to hot and nutritious food during their shifts. At a minimum, provide a microwave to allow workers to heat up their meals.

Provide access to health care and counseling—Shiftworkers often need health services during evening and nighttime hours. Provide a list of community health services with extended hours to employees.

Develop training and awareness programs—Educate employees and their families about the risks associated with not getting enough sleep. Provide them with information on how to cope with the stresses associated with shift work.

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