

## What shift workers can do to reduce fatigue

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

Shift workers are those people who work outside the regular daytime working hours. Because they are often tired or sleepy, they are more likely to make mistakes and have accidents on the job. Shift workers have an increased risk of certain health problems such as heart disease and digestive disorders. Shift workers also have difficulty maintaining normal social and family relationships because they are often working or sleeping when others are socializing.

Shift work is common among emergency response workers, such as law enforcement officers and firefighters, who must be available 24-hours a day. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that over half of all emergency workers work evening or nighttime shifts and about one quarter rotate from day to evening or night shifts.

### What can employees do to reduce fatigue?

The National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety (NIOSH) offers the following suggestions:

#### **Take responsibility for getting enough sleep—**

Most people need eight hours of sleep to feel refreshed. Shift workers can get their sleep all at once or in two shorter periods. Keep a regular sleep routine, if possible. Create rituals (like taking a bath) to get yourself ready for sleep. Darken your bedroom by installing light blocking curtains or shades. Block out noise by wearing earplugs, using a white noise machine (like a fan), unplugging the phone, and/or installing sound absorbing carpet and drapes.

**Exercise**—Exercise is recommended for all workers because it improves overall health and reduces stress. Exercise also tends to wake up the body, so shift workers should avoid exercising three hours before going to sleep. For the same reason, shift workers may want to exercise before going to work.

**Relaxation techniques**—Give yourself time to unwind and relax after work. Figure out what works for you. Try breathing exercises, meditating, praying, reading, watching TV or taking a bath.

**Diet**—Stick to a diet that helps you stay fit. Avoid excess fatty and sugary foods, which can make you gain weight. Avoid heavy or fatty foods in the middle of the night because they are difficult to digest. Don't go to bed too full or too hungry. Instead, eat a light snack before bedtime.

**Caffeine**—Caffeine is a mild stimulant that can help workers feel more alert and maintain performance. Caffeine is generally considered safe at low dosages (three or fewer caffeinated drinks per day), but should not be used as a replacement for sleep. Avoid caffeine late in a shift because it can make falling asleep later more difficult.

**Alcohol**—Avoid alcohol for two hours before sleep. Although alcohol can make you sleepy, it actually disturbs sleep. After drinking alcohol, a person sleeps more lightly and wakes up more frequently.

For more information, contact CTSI at 303-861-0507.

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