



## Important Things to Know About Shiftwork and Sleep

- People who work shifts often don't sleep as well as those who work set hours during the day.
- During night time work, it may be more difficult to concentrate and make decisions.
- Having enough sleep is important for safe driving.
- Twenty-four hours without sleep is as dangerous as double the legal limit of alcohol in your blood.
- A short nap will boost energy and concentration.
- Keeping to the same schedule is better for the body clock than changing work shifts.
- It is best to go to bed at the same time each day whenever possible.

## How can shiftwork affect my sleep?

Generally, the body is programmed to sleep best overnight and to be most alert during the day and early evening. If you work night shift, it might not be easy to sleep enough or to sleep well during the day. If you start work very early in the morning, it might be hard to sleep in the evening. The average shiftworker sleeps one hour a day less than someone who doesn't work shifts. Some shiftworkers sleep up to four hours a day less than normal, but this is not common.

## If I do shiftwork, am I more likely to be tired while I am awake?

Shiftworkers often complain of being tired, both on and off the job. It may be harder to concentrate and be alert while at work. This means there is more danger of accidents at work and on the road, driving to and from work. Sleep loss impairs performance: 17 hours without sleep is as dangerous as having a blood alcohol content of 0.05% and 24 hours without sleep, as dangerous as having a blood alcohol content of 0.08%.

## How common is this?

All shiftworkers will have some sleep issues. But there is good news. If the shift is kept the same, sleep will likely improve. There are ways to help people cope with shiftwork – sleep problems should be discussed with a GP, who may refer you to a sleep specialist.

## Why does this happen?

The human body is designed to be active during the day and rest at night. There are many body hormones that work to keep this in balance. It is not always easy to switch to being active at night and resting during the day.

## What can I do about it?

- Make time for enough sleep. Shiftworkers have to sleep when others are awake. Social and sporting events can be rearranged so that shiftworkers can still participate in these activities.
- Try to go to bed at the same time every day and get up at the same time also.

- Try to sleep in peace! Others in the house need to respect the need of the shiftworker to sleep. This may mean removing the telephone from the bedroom and having heavy carpet or curtains in the bedroom to help absorb any noise. Some shiftworkers find that wearing ear plugs to bed helps.
- A fan or “white noise” machine will help to muffle noise.
- Keep the bedroom cool and dark.
- Avoid caffeine, sleeping pills, alcohol or cigarettes before going to bed.
- If you can, sleep just before going to work. This is better than earlier in the day. If this is not possible, taking a nap before going to work may help.
- Some workers are allowed to take a break during their shift. This time can be used for a short nap.

## What can my employer do about it?

- Avoid scheduling back-to-back shifts. After working double or triple shifts, the problems only get worse.
- Keep each worker on the same shift. The best thing to do is to go to bed at the same time every day. If this is possible, the body will adapt to shiftwork better. If shifts are rotated often, it makes it difficult to develop a good sleep pattern.
- When shifts do rotate, rotate them forwards (morning to afternoon to evening to night) instead of backwards. For example, imagine someone is working afternoon shift. It is easier for this person to rotate forwards to evening shift than backwards to a morning shift.

- Schedule the heaviest work that requires most concentration during day shifts.
- Schedule breaks during night shifts. This allows tired workers to take a nap.

## How long should a nap be?

Fifteen minutes is best. Avoid napping for longer than this. When driving, pull over to a quiet spot and put the seat back. After the nap, walk around for 5 minutes to wake up properly before resuming other activities.

## I am having problems with my sleep. What should I do?

Contact your doctor. There are specialist sleep centres that can help.

## Where can I find out more?

[www.ohsrep.org.au/hazards/fatigue-impairment/fatigue-impairment-and-shift-work-more-info/index.cfm](http://www.ohsrep.org.au/hazards/fatigue-impairment/fatigue-impairment-and-shift-work-more-info/index.cfm)

[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Shiftwork\\_health\\_effects](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Shiftwork_health_effects)

[www.sleep.org.au/servicesdirectory](http://www.sleep.org.au/servicesdirectory)

This information is produced by:

### Sleep Health Foundation

ABN 91 138 737 854

[www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au](http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au)

A national organisation devoted to education, advocacy and supporting research into sleep and its disorders

### Sleep Disorders Australia

ABN 98 075 427 459

[www.sleepoz.org.au](http://www.sleepoz.org.au)

A voluntary group offering assistance and support to people and their families living with sleep disorders

### Australasian Sleep Association

ABN 32 172 170 561

[www.sleep.org.au](http://www.sleep.org.au)

The peak national association of clinicians and scientists devoted to investigation of sleep and its disorders

Disclaimer - Information provided here is general in nature and should not be seen as a substitute for professional medical advice. Ongoing concerns about sleep or other medical conditions should be discussed with your local doctor.

©Sleep Health Foundation, 2011



**Sleep Health Foundation** ABN 91 138 737 854

114/30 Campbell Street, Blacktown NSW 2148

T: +61 (0) 2 8814 8655 F: +61 (0) 2 9672 3884