

Night Shiftworkers

Alleviating the Effects of Shiftwork

Most people need 8 hours of sleep a day to feel rested. Parts of the nights sleep are spent in light sleep stages and the other parts of the night are spent in deep sleep stages. The deep sleep portion is the most important time of the sleep process where you nourish and restore your brain and body functions. Without the deep sleep you will not feel rested.

Throughout the night we go back and forth from deep to light sleep. We stay in the deep for about 45 minutes and then if we are deeply disrupted we come back up into light sleep. It is normal to have five 45 minutes deep sleep cycles in an 8 hour period. Anything that upsets these cycles will cause sleep problems.

If you work the night shift and sleep during the day, there are many things that can disturb your deep sleep and awaken you during your light sleep phase.

Quality Sleep

Although this is obvious some shift workers don't understand that there are simple things that can be done to encourage quality sleep:

- Quietness, no noisy children, lawn mowers or air conditioners etc
- Maybe sound proofing the bedroom
- Darkness, using special light proof curtains
- Temperature control, neither too hot or too cold
- Humidity control, so that it is comfortable for sleeping
- A comfortable bed, suitable for the shift worker
- Sleeping aids like blindfolds and ear plugs
- Going to bed with an empty bladder, visit the bathroom before bed
- Do not drink tea or coffee before going to bed. Caffeine is a mild stimulant and this will keep you awake.

Dehydration

Mild dehydration is a problem for shift workers. Drinking plenty of non alcoholic and non caffeine drinks will help the dehydration during the night. But it then creates a powerful urge to urinate during the first sleep after working the shift. So it's a difficult choice. By fixing one problem you create another. Trial and error will help establish when is the best time to drink throughout the night.

Exercise

Studies have shown that extra exercise does help shift lag. But it is hard to get excited about doing more exercise when you feel "fatigued" from working shifts. Exercise should be taken on waking and not before going to sleep.

Support from family and friends

With irritability one of the leading characteristics of shift workers, an understanding partner and family does help. Especially if they are able to manage this difficult behaviour. Many people just react without thinking and this can inflame an already difficult situation

Accidents.

More accidents are known to occur at night and following a night shift.

Mistakes and accidents have occurred in various professions due to chronic sleep deprivation. Such accidents as the **Chernobyl Disaster** and the **Selby Railroad** crash occurred due to people being over tired. The latter accident occurred as the result of the car driver falling asleep at the wheel. Thus shift working is now considered a Public Health concern as accidents occur not only in the workplace through chronic sleep deprivation but on the roads as well.

Problems include,

short term:

sleep disruption
fatigue
stress
irritability

long term:

gastrointestinal disorders
loss of appetite
constipation
heartburn
stomach pains
flatulence
peptic ulcers.

The above are caused by changes in central nervous system & endocrine mechanisms. (Meal time change is one of the causational factors.)

Good Points

Working shifts does have many good points which go a long way to mitigate any effects of shift work at nights. Examples:

- Children related duties and child care is easier when both parents are working shifts
- Similarly, looking after aged or infirm relatives
- Hobbies and activities that require day light, such as playing golf, fishing, and gardening

- Commitments such as doctor & dentist visits would not need a day off work.

Being the Wrong Person to do Shift Work

Because people are different there is also a big difference to how much each person suffers from shift lag. Some can't do night shift work while others find it less stressful than most. If you are one of those who finds night shift work very difficult, changing your job - if possible - may be the best long term solution.