

Coping with shift work

Many people have jobs that require them to work other than dayshift. Working irregular hours requires an individual to adjust their mind and body to sleeping during daylight hours. Most find this very difficult and many seek help to get the productive sleep required to insure they stay awake and safe during their shift work. Night workers get less sleep than day workers and their sleep is less restful. Sleep is needed to restore and rejuvenate the brain and body in order for it to function properly. The following guidelines may help shift work become easier and safer:

- ask all family members to be as quiet as possible while your sleeping
- make sure that your room is dark
- use an answering machine for phone calls and turn down the ringer
- sleep in a cool environment to help you stay asleep
- avoid caffeine and alcohol for at least three hours or longer before going to bed
- always try to keep regular sleeping hours
- don't eat a heavy meal prior to going to bed
- take a bath or shower prior to going to bed, this will relax the body so good sleep is possible
- reading the newspaper or watching television will help you unwind and relax prior to going to sleep
- avoid nicotine
- use sleeping pills conservatively; don't use over the counter sleeping pills
- never combine sleeping pills with alcohol
- sleep in your bed, don't fall asleep in your work clothes in front of the television
- place "Do Not Disturb" signs on your door
- inform neighbors, friends and family of your sleep pattern; this will help minimize disturbances
- reduce stress in your life
- darken the room, use blackout curtains.

How to enhance work performance

On night shift, you will be working when your body really wants to sleep. Between 2 - 5 a.m. are the worst hours of the shift. During these hours the body becomes really tired. To ensure mental alertness and proficiency during your shift:

- keep the work place well lighted; don't dim the lights
- talk to your co-workers during the shift, this will help everyone be more alert
- if you are feeling tired, stand up and walk around or do some type of exercise to get the body to exert energy, this will help boost alertness
- keep the workplace cool; a workplace that is warm will only make the body want to sleep
- try to have access to plenty of caffeinated beverages early in the work period
- go to the restroom and wash your hands and face, this will help you stay alert
- listen to the radio to keep your mind active
- the timing of meals can keep energy levels up and help the body adjust to shift work; healthy snacks like fruit, juice and vegetables are good to eat at home or work.

Driving home after shift work

Driving home can be a dangerous situation for shift workers. You have been awake all night and your body wants to sleep during your trip home. Shift workers have a high risk of falling to sleep behind the wheel because they have been awake for 12 -16 hours, or more. If you are sleepy after your shift, try the following steps to arrive at home safely:

- take a nap prior to driving
- drive defensively; stay alert of your surroundings, your driving and other drivers as well
- if you start yawning, blinking your eyes frequently or a feel a sense of tiredness; pull off the road where you will be safe from other traffic and walk around or stretch until you feel more awake
- carpool; let the most alert person do the driving
- use public transportation
- using the car heater can make you become drowsy; adjust the heater to an appropriate setting
- driving with the window down and listening to the radio can work for a short time; but is not recommended for long periods of time.

Adapting to shift work

Adapting to shift work is easy for some people, but not so easy for others. Some people never adjust to the change of working different shifts. Often older workers have more problems adjusting to shift work than the younger working population. Hopefully using these tips will help you get good sleep, stay awake at work and be safe driving home after your shift.

If you need additional help talk to:

- your supervisor or manager
- your co-workers
- a doctor or nurse
- staff counselors.

The overall responsibility for getting enough sleep is up to you. There is simply no substitute for sleep.