

SHIFT WORK AND SLEEP

Shift work is working outside of normal hours and in particular working during times when we would normally be asleep.

Why does shift work make sleeping so difficult?



Sleeping against the body clock

The body has an in-built biological rhythm which keeps you alert during daylight hours. Sleeping during the day makes it harder to drift off and to get 7 – 8 hours of uninterrupted sleep.



Irregular schedules

Regular wake-up and sleep times produce hormones which act as signals for the body to sleep or to wake. The more often you switch your schedule, the harder it is for the body to adjust.



Sleeping out of sync with everyone else

Staying asleep with the noises of daytime hustle and bustle around you can seem impossible. Family and personal relationships may also mean that sleep is not a priority.

How do you sleep?

Do you feel well rested after a night's sleep?

Do you have trouble adjusting to your shift patterns?

Tips for helping shift-work related sleep problems

On average, night shift workers sleep for **2 hours less** than the average adult. This sleep debt puts shift workers at more risk of accidents and increases long term health risks. **Read on for strategies to help you to minimize your sleep debt.**

1

Before night shift

- The first day off after working a night shift pattern will be when you are most out of phase. It may be most helpful to remain awake until you are tired and then schedule a brief block of sleep of 2-4 hours. Remember that sleep can be flexible – just find a pattern that suits you.
- A word about naps... there are two schools of thought. One is that napping interferes with your sleep cycle. Another is that naps may be helpful to shift workers.
- **There are two types of naps:**
 - Prophylactic naps** - planned in the evening before the shift starts to minimise anticipated sleep deprivation.
 - Recuperative naps** - taken at night to temporarily relieve tiredness.
- When napping, remember: if you nap for more than 30-40 minutes your body will enter deep sleep. The advantage of deep sleep is that it will help to reduce a sleep debt, but it can take around an hour to be fully alert again, so allow time to wake up afterwards.
- Most people can cope with up to a 2-3 hour shift in their sleep-wake cycle. If you have a few days before you start night shifts, gradually taper your sleep and wake times towards the new schedule, for example, by rising 2 hours later each day and going to bed 2 hours later.
- Stay awake until a near normal bedtime to sync back into a regular cycle.



2

Staying alert during work

- Seek out bright light before and during the early part of a night shift. Even if work areas need to have dim light, break areas should still be well lit.
- A mid shift power nap of up to 30-40 minutes is more effective than coffee for improving alertness. Of course, this is not always practical in every workplace.
- When you have the same shift for at least a few days, eat meals and snacks at the same time each day to promote regular body cycles. If you are working nights for several days, eat 'lunch' mid way through your shift.

3

After night shift

- Wear sunglasses on the journey home – your sleep cycle reacts to sunlight
- Follow the same routine to prepare for bed on day or night shifts. This will encourage pattern recognition and get the body ready for sleep – a light snack, a warm bath, brushing your teeth, soothing music, relaxation exercises or meditation could be part of a wind down routine.
- If you live in a noisy environment, look at soundproofing your bedroom with double-glazing, carpets, blackout blinds and heavy curtains and even wall insulation. Ear plugs could also help to preserve your peace and quiet.

Sleep Checklist



Good sleep is influenced by many factors. Tick the items you have managed each day. You can then use this checklist to see where you may need to make changes to your routine.

Before bed:	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
I exercised today							
I avoided caffeine from 2pm							
I did not nap today							
I did not use alcohol or drugs to help me sleep							
I did not use my phone, tablet or other 'blue light' electronic devices within 2 hours of going to bed							
In bed:	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
I used my bed for sleep and sex only							
I did not use my phone or tablet whilst in bed							
If I woke up during the night, I did not check the time							
If I woke up during the night for more than 20 minutes, I got out of bed and returned to bed when I was tired							
My bedroom is cool, dark and my bed is comfortable							
Getting up:	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
I got out of bed at a regular time (I didn't 'lie-in')							

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