**BALANCING SHIFT WORK AND GETTING ENOUGH SLEEP**

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**Tools for Increasing Personal Success**

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**This topic is for people who have to consider sleeping and resting time when they work a night shift or rotating shifts.**

Unfortunately, many people who are working rotating shifts often have difficulty getting enough sleep. While some can manage this by getting more sleep on days off, it is possible to develop an on-going problem with chronic tiredness and other related conditions.

Having trouble getting enough sleep when working nights or rotating shifts may shows up when you have trouble staying awake or alert when you are supposed to work your shift. You may not be able to sleep well during the day, and you may not feel rested with the sleep you do get.

The Shift/Sleep balance issue involves a problem with your body's 24-hour internal clock, or [circadian rhythm](http://www.webmd.com/hw-popup/circadian-rhythms). Light and dark help your body know when to be active and when to rest. Light is a cue to be awake, while dark tells your body to sleep. When you work at night and sleep during the day, your body's internal clock needs to reset to let you sleep during the day. Sometimes that's hard to do. Changing the ‘regular’ timing of sleeping is difficult for the body to accept.

If you are working 12 hour periods of time, the ability to balance is even more complex since you will only have about 10 hours (after counting working and travel/preparation time) to use in getting sleep. And your ‘sleep time’ may be during the dark hours and sometimes during daylight time. Shift workers attempt to crowd a lot of ‘normal’ activities (shopping, picking up the kids, going out to eat and movies/TV) into the 10 hour block and still attempt get enough sleep. Normally, adults need 7-8 hours of restful sleep. If we say 8 hours sleep, that really only leaves **TWO hours** to spend between working and sleeping. So, “enough sleep” simply isn’t possible with all those other activities. This realization is sometimes difficult but once you accept that you will do mostly WORK and SLEEP on those days, you can take advantage of the 2-3 hours you have left to do some limited activities if remember to limit activities so that there is STILL room for 7-8 hours of restful sleep your body needs to stay healthy.

**There are some solutions and things which will help if you find yourself having a “shift-sleep imbalance”.**

Let’s talk some about the reality of the problem. Shift work can increase [stress](http://www.webmd.com/hw-popup/stress), and that may make you more likely to get sick. Lack of sleep for shift workers can increase the chance of car accidents and on-the-job accidents. It also can lead to trouble concentrating at work and poor job performance. Sleep is critical for physical and mental health and remember, 8 hours is the focus number for adults. Trying to shortchange your body on the sleep and recovery it needs won’t work well.

**Identify a suitable sleep schedule**

Most adults need 7-8 hours sleep a day although this may decrease with age. If you cannot do this, “rest” can be still be beneficial. There is no “RIGHT” plan for everyone.

* If you work regular shifts, try going to bed at different times for example soon after you arrive back from work; or stay up and sleep before the next shift;
* have a short sleep before your first night shift;
* if coming off night shifts, have a short sleep and go to bed earlier that night;
* once you have identified a suitable sleep schedule try to keep to it.

**Make the environment favorable for sleeping**

Sleep loss and fatigue are some of the most significant problems for shift workers. It is important to try and maintain your normal level of sleep and rest. Daytime sleep is usually lighter, shorter and of poorer quality than night time sleep. It is more frequently disturbed because of warmer temperatures and daytime noise. To help make the environment favorable for sleeping:

* sleep in your bedroom and avoid using it for other activities such as watching television, eating and working;
* some people have a different sleep room that is isolated from noise, is dark and away from day time activities in the home, and provides the comfort needed for good sleep;
* use heavy curtains, blackout blinds or eye shades to darken the bedroom;
* disconnect the phone or use an answering machine and turn the ringer down;
* ask your family not to disturb you and to keep the noise down when you are sleeping;
* discuss your work pattern with close neighbors and ask them to try and avoid noisy activities during your sleep time;
* if it is too noisy to sleep consider using earplugs, white noise or background radio music, or a box fan to mask external noises;
* adjust the bedroom temperature to a comfortable level, cool conditions improve sleep.

**Techniques to promote sleep**

To promote sleeping, try to follow a similar routine to the one you follow before a normal nights sleep. The following tips may help you relax after a shift and promote sleep:

* go for a short walk, relax with a book, listen to music and/or take a hot bath before going to bed;
* avoid vigorous exercise before sleep as it is stimulating and raises the body temperature;
* avoid caffeine, ‘energy’ drinks and other stimulants a few hours before bedtime as they can stop you going to sleep;
* don’t go to bed feeling hungry: have a light meal or snack before sleeping but avoid fatty, spicy and/or heavy meals, as these are more difficult to digest and can disturb sleep;
* avoid alcohol as it lowers the quality of sleep.

**Diet and Eating or Drinking**

It is very important to consider the timing and quality of your meals. Digestive problems are common in shift workers due to disruption of the body clock and poor diet. Plan your meals to help you stay alert at work and to relax/sleep when you need to rest.

* regular light meals/snacks are less likely to affect alertness or cause drowsiness than a single heavy meal;
* choose foods that are easy to digest such as pasta, rice, bread, salad, fruit, vegetables and milk products;
* avoid fatty, spicy and/or heavy meals as these are more difficult to digest. They can make you feel drowsy when you need to be alert. They may also disturb sleep when you need to rest;
* avoid sugary foods, such as chocolate – they provide a short-term energy boost followed by a dip in energy levels;
* fruit and vegetables are good snacks as their sugar is converted into energy relatively slowly and they also provide vitamins, minerals and fiber;
* drink plenty of fluid as dehydration can reduce both mental and physical performance but avoid drinking too much fluid before sleeping as this may overload the bladder.

**Stimulants and sedatives**

Shift workers often turn to stimulants such as coffee or cigarettes to keep them awake and sedatives such as alcohol or sleeping pills to help them sleep. Avoid such aids as they only have short-term effects on alertness as tolerance to their effects develops. Persistent use may also increase the risk of dependence.

* caffeine is a mild stimulant present in coffee, tea and cola as well as in tablet form and in special ‘energy’ drinks. It can improve reaction time and feelings of alertness for short periods. Only use caffeine occasionally and don’t rely on it to keep you awake. If you do decide to take caffeine or other stimulants, you should consider what might happen when its effects wear off when you are operating machinery or driving.
* avoid the use of alcohol to help you fall asleep. Although alcohol can promote the onset of sleep it is also associated with earlier awakenings, disrupted sleep and poorer sleep quality. Regularly drinking too much increases the risk of long-term damage to your physical and mental health, your work, social and personal relationships.
* regular use of sleeping pills and other sedatives to aid sleep are not recommended because they can lead to dependency and addiction.
* new sleep medications have recently been developed that can alter our state of alertness. Although their use may be widespread, the ways in which they work and their long-term effects are not yet fully understood and consequently their use is not advised unless under medical supervision.

**Physical fitness and a healthier lifestyle**

An unhealthy lifestyle combined with shift work may increase the likelihood of sleep disorders and sleep loss or exacerbate existing sleep problems. A good diet, regular meals and exercise can improve sleep quality, health and well-being.

* you can improve your fitness by spending 30 minutes a day on a physical activity including housework and walking. Consider joining a gym or taking part in a regular exercise class;
* eat healthy meals on a regular basis;
* cut down or give up smoking;
* reduce your alcohol intake;
* seek advice from your doctor if you require regular medication such as insulin for diabetes or suffer from a chronic condition such as epilepsy.

**Family and friends**

*Working shifts that differ from the routines of friends and family can leave you feeling isolated and it is important to make the effort not to lose contact with them:*

* talk to friends and family about shift work. If they understand the problems you are facing it will be easier for them to be supportive and considerate;
* make your family and friends aware of your shift schedule so they can include you when planning social activities;
* make the most of your time off and plan mealtimes, weekends and evenings together;
* plan your domestic duties around your shift schedule and try to ensure that you do not complete them at the cost of rest/sleep. You may need to change the times/days when some jobs are done;
* invite others who work similar shifts to join you in social activities when others are at work and there are fewer crowds.

**Ways to improve your alertness at work**

On some shifts, such as nights and very early mornings you may find it difficult to remain alert and this can affect your performance. It may also increase the risk of errors, injury and accidents. You may find it helpful to:

* some moderate exercise before starting work may increase your alertness during the shift;
* keep the light around your work area bright;
* take regular short breaks during the shift if possible;
* get up and walk around during breaks; do NOT take a ‘nap’ as this will work against you
* plan to do more stimulating work at the times you feel most drowsy;
* keep in contact with co-workers as this may help both you and them stay alert.

**12 HOUR SHIFT PATTERNS** vs **8 HOUR SHIFT PATTERNS**

WORK **12 hours** 8am-8pm, etc. WORK **8 hours** 7am-3pm, etc.

TRAVEL/GET READY TIME **2 hours** TRAVEL/READY TIME **2 hours**

SLEEP TIME **7-8 hours** SLEEP TIME **7-8 hours**

TOTAL Hours: **21-22 hours** TOTAL Hours: **17-18 hours**

DIFFERENCE: **4-5 HOURS**

It is important to understand clearly and accept the difference of 12 vs 8 hour shifts. While working an 8 hour shift gives you more time off on a daily basis, there are more work days and less time off between work days. A 12 hour shift model calls for more work in a day but for fewer days working and MORE days off. There IS a difference and once you back up and look at the differences, you can BALANCE your WORK/SLEEP/FUN and other time in ways to make sure you maintain a healthy lifestyle and keep doing well on your job. It DOES mean that you need to consider the number of hours you work in each day, the number that you have left to sleep and what you can do with the remainder.