



Shiftwork: Challenges and Managing Risks

Shiftwork challenges people to work and sleep in opposition to their circadian rhythm, also known as the body clock. Sleeping during the day often reduces both the quantity and quality of sleep. Working at night requires pushing past fatigue to remain alert and vigilant when the body wants to be asleep.

Shift workers often struggle to get enough sleep – and must remain alert when their bodies are telling them to sleep.

Shift workers are at risk

Those most at risk are night shift workers and those who work consecutive shifts.

- Fatigue-related safety risks increase during night shifts, especially between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m.
- Studies show the risk of injury or accident on the night shift is 30% higher compared to day shift
- Working multiple nights in a row increases risks as employees build up a sleep debt
- Risks are 36% higher on the fourth consecutive night shift compared to the first
- Employees on afternoon shifts or with early morning start times also suffer from sleep loss

Managing risks

Both employees and employers can help reduce the risks of shiftwork.

Employers

- Forward-rotate shifts, day to afternoon to night, while providing additional time for rest between shifts
- Limit the number of consecutive night shifts
- Slowly rotate shifts to reduce the impact on sleep schedules, the Panama shift schedule is a good example
- Educate employees on sleep health, and encourage them to consult their doctor if they suspect they have a sleep disorder

Employees

- Make it a priority to sleep 7-9 hours every day (naps count, too!)
- Take a two-hour nap prior to the start of a night shift
- Learn about healthy sleep and ways to improve sleep health
- Get screened for a sleep disorder
- During a night shift, seek bright lighting to increase alertness
- Break up tedious tasks with physical activity such as short walks
- Take chat breaks with co-workers to boost mental alertness
- Caffeine can be beneficial for short term alertness, but should not replace sleep or be used too close to the end of a night shift or it can interrupt sleep

Shift workers are often the most at risk.

Visit [NSC.org/fatigue](https://www.nsc.org/fatigue) for more information and resources
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