

SLEEP AND SHIFT WORK

SLEEP & SHIFT WORK

Sleep is an important resource that keeps you healthy, mentally sharp, and able to cope with stress. If you work at night or often rotate shifts, you may have disordered sleep. Working non-traditional hours is more common than you might think. In industrialised nations, up to 20% of workers work either night or rotating shifts. Being sleep affected at work (when working traditional or non-traditional hours) can affect your memory and your ability to focus can become impaired. This may lead to irritability or low mood which may impact on relationships and a decreased social life too. However, the good news is you can minimise these potential problems by following a few simple tips.

Working Shifts: 8 Tips for Better Sleep

If your job requires that you work the night shift or hours other than the traditional nine to five, you need to pay close attention to your sleep. These tips can help you get good sleep:

1. If you're working the night shift, when you wake up try to expose yourself to bright light, such as that from special light boxes and lamps. Being exposed to bright light when you start your "day" can help train your body's internal clock to adjust.
2. If possible, try not to work a high number of consecutive night shifts in a row, without a break. You're more likely to recover if you can schedule at least one day off per week. Otherwise you're may become increasingly more sleep deprived.
3. Try not to perform many tasks on your way home from an evening or night shift. This will wake you and it will become more difficult to sleep as you return home.
4. If possible, avoid as much bright light as you can on the way home from work, which will make it easier for you to fall asleep once you hit the pillow. Wear dark, wraparound sunglasses to shield yourself from sunlight.
5. Limit caffeine and alcohol. Drinking a cup of coffee at the beginning of your shift will help promote alertness. But don't consume caffeine later in the shift or you may have trouble falling asleep when you get home. Alcohol also disrupts our refreshing phase of sleep, making us feel fatigued the next day.
6. Stick to a regular sleep-wake schedule as much as you can and have a wind down routine to prepare you for sleep.
7. Ask your family to limit phone calls and visitors during your sleep hours to keep noise to a minimum. Ear plugs can also help reduce environmental noise.
8. Sunlight is a potent stimulator of the circadian rhythm (sleep cycle) which is controlled by a part of the brain influenced by light. Use blackout blinds or heavy curtains to block sunlight when you sleep during the day. Even if your eyes are closed, the sunlight coming into the room tells your brain that it's daytime, yet your body is tired and you're trying to sleep.

Help and Support

The hallmarks of disordered sleep are excessive sleepiness during night work and insomnia when trying to sleep during the daytime. If you have significant symptoms – including headaches, serious lack of energy and trouble concentrating – you should talk to your doctor or Occupational Health Department. There are a whole range of treatments and supports available from behavioural adjustments such as improving sleep hygiene, specific psychotherapy including sleep scheduling and medications. You could also try Headspace which offers mindfulness meditation in bite size ten minute exercises. It's easy to follow and is delivered through an app or online and it's been shown to reduce stress, improve sleep and even increase focus.