



# Working Hours and Health

**T**he best shift for our health is days. Staying awake when our bodies would rather be asleep is a strain on our health and affects our well-being. Long hours of work lead to chronic fatigue, sleep loss and stress-related ill health.

There is a wealth of scientific evidence from many authoritative sources e.g. Health and Safety Executive which shows that:

- Shift workers show increased rates of chronic fatigue and gastric and duodenal ulcers.
- Repetitive, monotonous work is less well performed at night.
- 20% of shiftworkers choose to leave their jobs, some of them forced to by health reasons.
- After 15-20 years of shiftwork, 20% of shiftworkers had cardiovascular disease. This is three times the rate in dayworkers in similar jobs.
- 30-50% of shiftworkers suffer from indigestion, two to five times the rate for dayworkers. They suffer from peptic ulcers at an earlier age: if they leave shiftwork, their peptic ulcers often improve.
- More shiftworkers and former shiftworkers suffer from anxiety and depression.

## The human body clock

The human body clock is set so that we are awake, alert and active during the day. This is the time

when we eat several meals and we do not feel sleepy (except for a short time in the early afternoon).

The body naturally slows down at night, our body temperature falls slightly, we sleep for about seven hours without waking, we do not feel hungry, the digestive system is less active, it is harder to digest food, and the balance of protective hormones in the blood is different.

## Working at night upsets our body clock

We are less awake and less alert working at night. Working at night is more tiring, physically and mentally.

## Shiftworkers sleep fewer hours

- It is harder to sleep as long and as well during daylight hours. when your body is feeling awake
- Your 'sleep debt' when you are working nights or early mornings can be as much as two hours less sleep each day. Even permanent nightworkers do not completely reset their body clock. They just manage with less sleep. They do however

get more sleep than rotating shiftworkers.

## The Working Time Regulations (WTR) 1998

- **Daily rest:** Workers are entitled to 11 hours uninterrupted rest between each working day.
- **Breaks:** Workers are entitled to a break of at least 20 minutes if they work for more than 6 hours.
- **Maximum weekly working time:** Workers cannot be forced to work more than 48 hours a week on average. If you have signed an agreement with your employer to work more than 48 hours, you can write and tell your employer you wish to opt back in to Working Time protection.
- **Annual leave:** Every worker – whether full time or part time – is entitled to 4 weeks paid annual leave (+ Bank Holidays from 1 October 2007).



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- **Night workers:** should not work more than 8 hours a day on average. If the work involves special hazards or heavy physical or mental strain, then there is an absolute limit of eight hours.
- **Health assessments:** should be offered to night workers.
- **Transfer to day work:** should be offered to night workers who suffer from health problems caused or made worse by working at night, when advised by a doctor.
- **New and expectant mothers:** should be offered changes in working hours, especially from night work to day work, if this is advised by a doctor or midwife.

## What can be done to help shiftworkers?

### Shiftwork systems

There is no such thing as a good shift system. These are guidelines for 'less bad' compromises.

- Choosing your personal, 'least worst shifts' is the best compromise. Workplaces that offer a system for choosing preferred shifts, or the informal 'swapping' of shifts, and the fair sharing of unpopular shifts (when these are essential, eg in the NHS, or care work), are healthier workplaces. Some people prefer one regular shift, even a permanent night shift.
- There should be a break of at least 11 hours between shifts (WTR).
- Rotation should follow the clock so you can get up later and go to bed later for each successive shift: i.e. mornings, then afternoons, then nights, then a break. This fits the body clock better (it runs a bit slow).
- There should be a break of at least 24 hours after a spell of night shifts.
- There should not be more than two nights' work in a row, otherwise a large sleep debt builds up.
- Night shifts should be shorter than day shifts (8 hours not 12 hours) for safety reasons. Staying alert for 12 hours at night is even more of a strain than staying alert during the day. Heavy physical work is even more tiring at night than during the day.
- Long shifts, either day or night, (more than 8 hours) can contribute to accidents and mistakes.
- There should be no overtime before or after night shifts.
- Morning shifts should start as late as possible. Leaving home before 5.45am means up to 2 hours less sleep. Your body clock stops you falling asleep even if you go to bed earlier.
- There should never be double shifts.
- There should be at least 2 consecutive days off in 14 days, and no more than 5 to 7 days of consecutive work.
- Workers should be given the choice of daywork, especially older workers. We become less tolerant to upsetting our body clocks as we get older.
- Split shifts should be avoided.
- Shift systems should only be introduced after consultation with Trade Unions and workers. There should always be a trial period (e.g. 6 months) and review.

### Coping with nightwork

Either you can try and turn your body clock round, by working permanent nights, and staying up at night on your nights off, or you can try to keep your body clock as normal as possible and sleep as

much and as well as possible.

### Try to get enough sleep

The main problem is staying asleep in the daytime.

- Get to bed before the sun comes up (impossible in the summer): your body will get to sleep more easily if it is dark.
- Go straight to bed, don't do the housework first.
- Go to bed, don't snatch sleep on the sofa in the living room.
- Don't drink alcohol to get you to sleep: you will wake up too soon and it is hard to get back to sleep during the day.
- Caffeine stays in the body for five hours, so drink your last coffee, tea or cola at least five hours before going to bed.
- Eat a light meal before going to bed, so that hunger does not wake you.
- Have a short nap (if you can) before starting a night shift.

### Staying alert

Driving at night? Keep the cab cool, play some music, listen to the radio. Do the same when driving home from night shifts; this is the worst time for accidents.

The last hours of the night shift are the worst. Take a rest break at about 4am; this is the lowest time for the body. Move about, talk to people. Keep the most interesting part of the job till then if you can. Eat a meal during your rest break.

### Days off

Turn back to a daytime person. Have a shorter sleep (2 to 4 hours) after your last night shift, then you will feel sleepy at normal bedtime at the end of the day.