BEST PRACTICE: SHIFT WORKERS

Don’t Short Your Shift Workers
Do shift workers fall at the wayside when it comes to safety talks and safety meetings? Make sure you are scheduling time for them to learn the material, too.

How to Perk Up Your Night Shift Workers
Nearly one in four full-time workers in North America are shiftworkers. Studies have shown that shiftworkers are at increased risk for fatigue...

Work Nights? Go Easy on the Coffee
Millions of people rely on coffee to help keep them alert during night shifts, but a new Canadian study suggests that they are paying for that benefit...
03
Safety Talk
Shifting Into Night Shift Safely

05
Safety Article
Don’t Short Your Shift Worker

07
Safety Article
How to Perk Up Your Night Shift Workers

09
Safety Article
Shift Starting Times Key to Worker Alertness

11
Safety Talk
Healthcare Shiftworkers Keep the Door Revolving
Shifting Into Night Shift Safely

In many industries, falling asleep on the job for even 30 seconds can cause a serious mistake. Yet studies show that 30 to 50% of night shift workers report falling asleep at least once a week while on the job. Sleep issues affect truck and bus drivers, airline pilots, factory workers, police, emergency workers, healthcare providers, hotel employees and anyone else on night or changing shifts.

The body has high and low points every 24-hour period. Body and brain functions slow down during the nighttime and early morning in a pattern known as circadian rhythms. Working while the body is at its low point is stressful and fatiguing, increasing the risk of accidents. In fact, according to one study, workers who work night or rotating shifts may be twice as likely to get hurt on the job as workers on day shifts. Fatigue also impairs judgment, making the workplace less safe for others, too.

Air traffic control services at Washington Ronald Reagan National Airport were briefly interrupted in the early hours of March 23, 2011, requiring two flights to land at the airport without any assistance from the tower. Investigators later determined that the supervisory controller, who had 20 years of experience, had been alone in the control tower and was on his fourth consecutive overnight shift. He’d fallen asleep while on duty.

SLEEP BETTER:

- Try to sleep the same hours whether you’re working or off-shift. If this is not possible, have at least four hours of your two sleep schedules overlapping.
- Arrange your bedroom for sleeping comfort. Heavy drapes, insulated window coverings or aluminum foil can reduce the light and noise and help maintain a comfortable temperature. If outside noises wake you up, sleep with the radio on low volume or a fan running to muffle these sounds.
- Write down worries on a piece of paper before you go to sleep.
- Don’t use alcohol to help you sleep. While it might make you drowsy, the resulting sleep is often interrupted by wakefulness later.
- Before bed, soak in a warm bathtub, listen to music, read, meditate or watch television.
- Avoid vigorous exercise within a couple of hours before bed, because exercise speeds up metabolism.
- Avoid going to bed hungry. A light snack can relax you.
• Let other people know about your sleep schedule so they will not disturb you. Post a calendar of your shifts at home to help your family plan around your work and sleep schedule.

WORK SAFER:

• Dim lights can make you sleepy, so turn up the lights in your work area.

• Lower the temperature to help you stay alert, but not to the point where you’re uncomfortably cool.

• If possible, take fresh-air breaks.

• Vary your tasks.

• Work with special care on overnight shifts, keeping in mind you may not be as alert as usual or have the same quick reflexes. Double-check your work and equipment. Use checklists for longer or complicated tasks.

• Be honest about fatigue. If you’re too tired to work safely, tell your supervisor.

Shiftworkers face many challenges, including physical and mental fatigue. Use healthy coping strategies to make shiftwork safe and successful for you and those around you.
Do your off-shift workers get short shifted when it comes to safety meetings? Those who work evenings or midnights need access to the same safety information as the day crews.

Scheduling safety meetings can be a problem, particularly for workers on rotating shifts or on call.
HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR ENSURING ALL SHIFTS HAVE REGULAR SAFETY MEETINGS:

• Set up a regular schedule for safety meetings, holding them at the same times and places each week. Post these schedules, and remind workers of the safety meetings when they get their new shift schedules.

• The time periods when shifts overlap could be opportunities to get workers from two shifts together for one safety meeting.

• Keep attendance records to make sure every worker has attended each safety meeting at some time during the week. You can use the safety talks signing sheet for this purpose.

• Put someone on each shift in charge of safety meetings. Supply them with the audio or computer CD, printed handouts and other materials.

• Set up a CD player with safety talks in the breakroom, or make a computer available in the training room.

• Send audio CDs of safety talks on the road with crews who travel to the worksites.

"Consider sending safety talk CDs home with your workers. These safety meeting guides don’t do much good gathering dust on a shelf. They are meant to be used anywhere and anytime."

• The PowerPoint version of a talk will be especially useful on the night shift by helping a tired worker pay attention.

• Consider sending safety talk CDs home with your workers. These safety meeting guides don’t do much good gathering dust on a shelf. They are meant to be used anywhere and anytime.

Shift your safety meeting schedule so you can include workers on all your shifts.
Nearly one in four full-time workers in North America are shiftworkers. Studies have shown that shiftworkers are at increased risk for fatigue—and for making safety related errors on the job—as a result of needing to be awake when their body clocks are telling them they should be sleeping.

The following eight tips from Circadian 24/7 Workforce Solutions can help safety directors and supervisors improve nightshift workers’ performance, reduce safety-related problems, boost morale and generally make your operation run more smoothly:

1. **Permit on-the-job exercise:** Several lab studies show that exercise during the overnight hours boosts alertness. Exercise promotes improved cardiovascular health and leads to better daytime sleep. Dispatch or call center operators may be able to use a stationary bike, a treadmill, and free weights while they work. You could also make such equipment available in or near a lounge area.

2. **Provide healthy snacks:** An irony of most workplaces is that the foods usually most readily available at work in vending machines and cafeterias — doughnuts, candy, cheese sandwiches, burgers etc. — are not particularly healthy choices. You can help out workers by providing fruits, vegetables, and other options in your cafeteria or vending machines.

3. **Subsidize extended-hour childcare:** Finding quality childcare that operates during irregular working hours is nearly impossible. Some companies provide centers where employees can drop off and pick up their kids without any hassle, in some cases subsidizing the costs.

4. **Allow music in the workplace:** Few tactics are more effective for improving morale than allowing workers to listen to music — particularly in monotonous jobs. In addition, some research has shown that music enhances alertness and improves productivity.

5. **Put e-mail to maximum use:** With proper precautions about overuse and etiquette, e-mail is an ideal tool for smooth communication in many operations. If employees already use computers, you can provide them with a daily update when they sign on upon arrival at work. And employees with home computers can log into the e-mail system when they want an update before coming to work.

6. **Allow napping on breaks:** Several studies show that short naps of 15 to 20 minutes provide an alertness boost that lasts several hours. A growing number of 24x7 companies encourage employees to take naps during breaks.

7. **Start their engines:** The only thing more annoying than finding your car battery dead at 5:30
8 p.m. is finding it dead at midnight or 7 a.m. To take one hassle out of workers’ lives, some employers offer a free car-starting service. Employees can call a nearby contracted company to jumpstart cars, and help usually arrives in minutes.

**8. Be flexible about shift changes:** Allowing workers to arrange their own shift change times can be a real morale booster. When safety and work rules permit, this sort of flexibility is greatly appreciated.

Circadian says there are many steps that supervisors and employees can take to reduce fatigue and improve performance, health, and safety, often at little or no cost.

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Shift starting times can have a significant effect on how sleep deprived or alert your shiftworkers are and, therefore, how safely they work, according to Circadian 24/7 Workforce Solutions.

Sleep deprivation is strongly linked to errors and greater risk for injury and death. Circadian says it’s important to balance the best time for starting the morning shift with the best time for ending the night shift, so workers can get enough sleep before the morning shift and after the night shift. The body’s biological clock controls alertness and sleepiness during the day.

Alertness is low and sleep is more easily achieved between 3 a.m. and 5 a.m. and also in the early afternoon. A person’s alertness is greatest during the morning and early evening hours. Circadian says morning shifts starting earlier than 6 a.m. have a great potential to cause sleep deprivation because workers often don’t get enough sleep beforehand. In order to do so, they would have to go to bed when their body clocks were at peak alertness.

Night-shift workers are also at risk for sleep deprivation because they tend to sleep neither as long nor as well during the day. Not only are they fighting their circadian clocks by sleeping during the day, but frequently they must also deal with noise and daylight. The later daytime sleep starts after a night shift ends, the more difficult it is for a worker to obtain adequate sleep.

Night shifts that finish late in the morning will not allow a person to obtain enough sleep and will lead to chronic sleep deprivation if not addressed. Circadian recommends starting day shifts later than 6 a.m. to allow workers to arrive sufficiently rested. Similarly, the earlier in the morning a night shift ends, the less likely your workers are to be working while sleep deprived.
Shiftworkers in the American healthcare industry had the highest voluntary job turnover rate of all industries in 2004, according to a study conducted by Circadian Technologies Inc.

Nineteen percent of healthcare workers chose to leave their jobs for similar or different careers last year. Burnout and stress from excessive overtime frequently drove their decisions to leave, says study co-author and senior Circadian consultant Dr. Alex Kerin.

The study, which involved about 130,000 workers in 400 US facilities, showed that workplaces operating outside the hours of 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., had a voluntary turnover rate averaging 10 percent last year. That compared to 3.2 percent voluntary staff turnover for businesses operating only during daytime hours.

But the number of healthcare workers choosing to leave their jobs for greener pastures last year was almost double the average rate for extended hours operations. Transportation and customer service industry jobs did not lag far behind, at 18 and 17 percent respectively last year.

According to Kerin, excessive overtime resulted in a doubling of absenteeism, with unfilled work hours...
increasing to 12.4 percent in 2004 from 5.8 percent just one year earlier.

Kerin said absenteeism is strongly linked to reduced sleep time, family and social life issues, and poorer overall health among shiftworkers.

“Increased overtime is not sustainable. As demand continues to increase in 2005, employers cannot just rely on existing employees. Overtime will become too much, compromising quality, safety, health and productivity,” he said.

Part of the solution to the high turnover rate in the healthcare industry lies in screening and treating employees for sleep disorders such as obstructive sleep apnea, and providing shiftworkers with strategies for improving their sleep hygiene. For example, unplugging telephones, using fans and other devices to block out intrusive sounds, and keeping rooms as dark as possible all help improve sleep quality among shiftworkers.

Circadian Technologies is a Lexington, MA-based research and consulting company that assists managers of extended hours operations in improving shiftworkers’ performance, health, safety and quality of life.

**HANDLE YOUR SHIFT-ING EMOTIONS**

You cope with night shift in the emergency room for eight hours, and then you get home to find your partner forgot your birthday. Tears flow. You know you’re overly emotional, but you can’t seem to stop.

Fatigued by working shifts, you might be hypersensitive. A remark that would make you chuckle when rested can result in hurt feelings. Fatigue can also lead to being cranky, moody or forgetful.

Your family needs to know that emotional symptoms are common to shiftworkers. Be patient and help them to remember that a work schedule out of synch with your biological clock is putting you under stress.

However, fatigue is no excuse for lashing-out with hurtful words or actions. Being aware of your emotions is the first step in dealing with situations wisely. Nurture your relationships and talk to your family about your work experiences.