

Shift work – overcoming the impact and effects on employee health

What is shift work?

Shift work is used by employers to provide a service around the 24 hour clock every day of the week and usually involves the 24 hour time slot being divided into 'shifts' - set periods of time for different groups of workers. The term 'shift work' includes both long term night shifts and work schedules in which employees change or rotate shifts.

The effects of working shifts on the body

When working shifts, particularly the night shift, the body clock is knocked out of its normal rhythm. A person's body clock is linked to the daily cycle of day and night and light and dark. It regulates all the functions of the body including body temperature, kidney function, blood pressure and digestion.

The digestive system also slows down at night so when an employee is awake overnight, they may have difficulty digesting certain foods. When working the night shift, the body is ready for sleep, so a worker may become less alert, physically less strong and mentally less clear; while their digestion is poor. After a night shift, the body is starting to wake up with the digestion, kidneys and other bodily systems ready for a day's work.

The impact of shift work on employee health

According to the HSE (Health and Safety Executive), research* has shown there can be undesirable consequences for those working shifts outside standard daytime hours, particularly on a night or early morning shift.

The health effects of shift working may include:

- disruption of the internal body clock
- fatigue and sleeping difficulties
- disturbed appetite and digestion
- reliance on sedative and/or stimulants

These effects can, in turn, can affect performance, increase the likelihood of errors and accidents at work and might affect health and wellbeing as shift work has also been linked to higher rates of type 2 diabetes, heart attacks and cancer, and may also contribute to strain in marital, family, and personal relationships.

Night shift workers may also face greater ill health effects, particularly those with long term exposure to shift work, which could include:

- chronic fatigue
- gastrointestinal problems such as indigestion
- abdominal pain, constipation, chronic gastritis and peptic ulcers
- cardiovascular problems such as hypertension, coronary heart disease
- increased susceptibility to minor illnesses such as colds, flu and gastroenteritis

Ways of overcoming the impact on employee health

In the UK, there is no specific health & safety legislation on shift working. However, employers have general health and safety responsibilities (eg a duty of care in law) for their workforce including removing or controlling the risks of fatigue by properly organising and planning shift working arrangements.

To help negate the impact of shift work on an employee's health, we would suggest employers:

- offer health questionnaires on an annual basis (as per the Working Time Directive), plus further medical investigation if required based on the results of the questionnaire
- provide regular health screening (eg respiratory, skin or audio checks etc) appropriate to the risks at work
- ensure counselling is available for employees suffering adverse effects of shift work
- provide information, support and opportunities for employees to stay physically fit and healthy
- allow two nights' full sleep when switching workers from day to night shifts and vice versa

Tips to help employees stay healthier while doing shift work

1. Establish a sleep routine

- Make your bedroom as much like night time as you can ie keep the room dark. Use heavy curtains/blinds, a blanket over the window or eye masks.
- Sleep on the quieter side of the house. To minimise sound disturbances, try using ear plugs.
- Keep the room cool, use a light quilt and consider using a fan to keep air circulating
- If you can't manage a longish period of quality sleep (at least 4 hours), try naps at different times of the day eg several hour long naps at different times of the day with the final one an hour or two before you go to work
- If you do wake, try lying still in the dark with your eyes shut to help you go back to sleep
- Avoid drinking liquid towards the end of your night shift. You will be drifting off to sleep but then you'll have to get up to go to the toilet
- Don't over exercise before bedtime – it can be too stimulating and may be difficult to bring down the adrenalin levels
- Reduce your caffeine intake. More than five cups of coffee or 10 cups of tea can increase the pulse rate and interfere with sleep patterns.

2. Readjust between shifts

After your last night shift, try sleeping for a maximum 4 hours, then get up and continue the day as normal so that you can return to sleep at your 'normal' time later that night.

Before returning to a set of nights, try and take a nap (1 to 3 hours) in the late afternoon prior to your first night shift.

3. Good digestion

Indigestion often affects shift workers. Its effects include heartburn, belching, flatulence, trapped wind, bloating and nausea.

There are many possible causes of indigestion:

- too much rich or fatty food
- too much alcohol
- eating too much, too quickly or too soon before going to bed
- smoking
- some medicines (eg aspirin, ibuprofen and some anti inflammatory drugs)

4. Indigestion remedies

- Antacids may be helpful in the short term, but should not be used for longer than two weeks
- Try to eat healthily, regardless of what shift pattern you are on
- Avoid rich and fatty food
- Eat spicy and salty foods in moderation
- Cut down on caffeine and alcohol and quit smoking
- Lose weight if you need to
- Avoid big meals
- Eat your food slowly and chew each mouthful to a pulp before swallowing
- Never eat 'on the run' and allow time to digest food before lying down
- Avoid aspirin or ibuprofen if prone to ulcers or stomach upsets
- See your GP if indigestion is a persistent problem

5. Family and social life

Shift work can disrupt your family and social life. So try to have one meal a day as a family. Be realistic about what you can do on your days off and recognise that you may be moody or irritable because of your shift work. But it's important to make the most of your free time.

6. Keep physically fit

Keeping fit and exercising regularly can positively affect your heart, lungs, stamina, weight and overall wellbeing.

Exercise can help you to:

- achieve and maintain your correct weight
- improve heart and lung capacity
- improve stamina and strength
- increase suppleness
- raise your temperature, help you 'wake up' and feel more alert
- improve digestive efficiency
- improve the quality of your sleep

Try to exercise or visit the gym for at least 20 minutes three times a week. For example, brisk walking, swimming, running, circuit training or cycling are all good cardiovascular activities, you just need to find one you enjoy.

In addition, you could:

- walk on short trips where you would have taken the car.
- use the stairs instead of lifts or escalators
- pace on the spot when doing everyday tasks like washing up or cleaning your teeth

NB: please check with your GP if you have not exercised for a while.

For further information, please email info@mohs.co.uk, visit mohs.co.uk or call 0121 601 4041