

# Preventing Worker Fatigue In Health Care Workers

Health care workers and responders may be required to work longer or unusual shifts. This may result in poor health and worker fatigue.

## What is worker fatigue?

- Fatigue is physical or mental exhaustion that can be triggered by stress; medication; overwork (heavy workload without conditioning); excessive heat; or underlying medical conditions such as mental and physical illness or disease.
- Several factors, including too little sleep or poor quality sleep over a period of time, can cause fatigue. Fatigue is the body's signal that a rest period is needed.
- Sleep is a biological need for life and health, similar to the need for food.
- The body is naturally designed for sleeping 7–8 hours during the nighttime. Working at night, at irregular times, and over long shifts can lead to shorter sleep duration and poorer quality sleep.
- Fatigue makes workers feel weary or unmotivated, reduces physical capacity, reduces productivity, and increases risk for worker errors and injuries.

## What are the effects of fatigue?

- Research indicates that working 12 hours per day is associated with a 37% increased risk of injury. Accident and injury rates are 18% greater during evening shifts and 30% greater during night shifts when compared with day shifts.
- Errors in donning and doffing PPE, more needlesticks and other exposure to blood and other body fluids, and more occupational injuries among healthcare workers can occur.
- Fatigue and stress from strenuous work schedules can be heavy physical workloads, long commutes, and personal demands on workers.

## What Employers can do

### Plan

Develop and implement a written Fatigue Risk Management Plan (FRMP) or system to reduce worker health and safety risks. It should include:

- a means of collecting and disseminating information on the hazards of fatigue, analyzing its risk, and implementing workplace controls;
- a reporting system for employees for injuries, illnesses, and incidents associated with fatigue; incident investigation—considering fatigue as a possible cause
- training and education for employees and management; and a review of the FRMP within a few months after inception and then annually thereafter to determine its
- effectiveness and implement any need for workplace improvements.

### Train

Provide worker training on the hazards and symptoms of worker fatigue along with:

- its impact on health and personal interactions at work
- personal strategies to get adequate sleep
- the importance of diet, exercise, and stress management strategies to minimize the adverse effects of fatigue

### Promote rest periods

Establish 10 consecutive hours of time-off per day to ensure workers have time to rest. Plan one or two full days off after a 40 hour week. Schedule adequate opportunities for rest breaks during work shifts. More, shorter breaks are better than fewer, longer breaks.

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## Examine shift lengths and work loads

- When you examine workloads, pay close attention to shift length. Five 8-hour shifts or four 10-hour shifts per week are usually manageable. 12-hour days may be tolerable if the workload is lighter and there are more frequent rest days added to the schedule.
- Implement shorter shifts during the evening and night. Night work intensifies fatigue because of the brain's strong pressure to sleep during the night.
- Examine staffing issues such as understaffing and worker absences (planned and unplanned)
- Establish procedures for meeting the workload when a worker is unable to work due to fatigue.
- Consider allowing naps during breaks.

## Monitor

Conduct health monitoring and surveillance to assess the physical and mental health of the workers before, during, and after the increased work demands.

## Control the environment

Design the work environment to promote alertness by making adjustments to lighting and temperature to increase worker comfort and reduce fatigue.

## Provide services to reduce non-work demands

- Provide Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and healthcare services for workers.
- Make healthy foods and drinks available at the worksite.
- To prevent drowsy driving crashes, consider arranging rooms to sleep close to the worksite or transportation to sleeping rooms for workers fatigued after work shifts.
- Consider laundering of clothes to reduce non-work demands.

## What workers can do

- Use the buddy system so that buddies can monitor each other and promote activities to increase the alertness of their partner.
- Always report workplace hazards to supervisors, including health and safety risks caused by a worker whose functioning is compromised because he or she is fatigued.
- Paragraph 11(c) of the Occupational Safety and Health Act prohibits employers from retaliating against workers for raising concerns about safety and health conditions. OSHA encourages workers who suffer such discrimination to submit a complaint to OSHA. Such complaints must be filed within 30 days.

- Sleep 7–8 hours every 24-hour period without disruptions. You've had enough sleep if you feel refreshed when you wake, don't feel drowsy during the day, and don't need much caffeine during the day.
- Sleep at the same time every day.
- Avoid liquids, alcohol, and heavy or spicy meals 2–3 hours before bedtime.
- Consume caffeine appropriately and according to your own sensitivity. Caffeine is a stimulant that can help you stay awake, but it can also affect your body for 5 hours or more. Plan any caffeine intake so that it does not prevent you from getting good sleep. Too much caffeine can cause severe disturbances to the heart and nervous system.
- Keep light levels low for 1–2 hours before bedtime. Stop using computers or other devices with backlit electronic screens during this time. If you must use them, turn down the screen brightness and wear dark sunglasses.
- Make sure that the sleeping environment is comfortable, cool, dark, and quiet. Reduce noise by wearing earplugs and by silencing cell phones. If you have to sleep during daylight hours, wear an eye mask or block any light from entering the bedroom through windows or doorways.
- If you are working evening or night shifts, get adequate sleep and rest before the shift to avoid coming to work fatigued. Plan to avoid being awake no more than 16 hours by the end of your shift.
- Keep a sleep diary and talk to a doctor if you have difficulty sleeping or have sleepiness or fatigue during work.
- To reduce the chance for an extended period of grogginess after taking a nap, use either short naps lasting less than 45 minutes or longer naps lasting 1.5 hours.
- Exercise regularly. Eat a balanced diet spaced out across the work shift. Stay hydrated. Maintain a healthy weight.

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