

SLEEP & SHIFT WORK

As our industries & services operate around the clock, many of us work shifts.

Successful adjustment to working shifts requires persistence in doing things right and knowing our limitations. It's not so much the schedules that cause problems, but our failure to have any long-term adjustment strategies.

Effective Adjustment Strategies

- **Before going to sleep - relax**

No matter what time you are going to sleep, maintain a similar before-bedtime routine. Most of us feel keyed up after work and we need to wind down before trying to sleep, even after working all night. Do something you find relaxing until you feel tired enough to sleep. A consistent 15 to 30 minute **pre-sleep ritual** such as a warm shower or reading a book, regardless of what time it is, will signal your body to prepare for sleep.



Both stimulants and depressants such as alcohol and coffee disrupt the natural cyclic process of sleep. In a typical sleeper, on average, 40 to 50 sleep stage changes occur in a good night's sleep. For people who are heavy smokers or drinkers, that number increases to about 100 sleep stage changes per night - a serious disruption.

Avoid caffeinated beverages, alcohol, sleeping pills, and nicotine. They cause sleep fragmentation with numerous arousals and disturbances. Drinking beer before bedtime can also mean getting up frequently to use the bathroom. Nicotine can cause an addictive reaction with the body starting to experience withdrawal symptoms resulting in early sleep awakening. Sleeping pills disrupt normal sleep and can also be addictive.

For good daytime sleep, you need cooperation from coworkers, family, and friends. It is important for everyone to communicate their needs in order to avoid frustration, disappointments and misunderstandings.

- **Straight nights**

Theoretically, working straight nights is better than rotating shifts. However, for this to work well you would need to maintain a consistent sleep schedule on work days as well as on days off. For most people, this is not practical and does not fit in with their family's schedules.

On work days, maintain a consistent sleep schedule, eg 8 am to 4 pm. On days off, stay up late and sleep in late, eg sleep from 4 am until noon. This overlapping period, called an **anchor sleep period**, should span at least 4 hours of time common to your sleep schedule on work days. This beats flip flopping between days and nights.

- **Rotating nights**

When not working nights, maintain your normal sleep schedule, eg midnight to 8 am. When working night shift, split your sleep into two periods, one on either side of your normal sleep period. Sleep from 8 am until noon, but then force yourself to get up. Sleep again right before going to work, say from 8 pm until midnight. Even though you do not normally sleep at this time, you will be sleepy after having cut your morning sleep short. Some people find it more difficult to function if they sleep just prior to night work, so experiment to find the best combination for you.

- **Straight evenings**

This is a more compatible shift with natural body rhythms especially if you can sleep late. Problems can arise if you have to care for children or pets. If you cut your sleep period short, you will have to adjust to napping sometime during the day, as long as you can make it as regular as possible.

- **Occasional nights**

When you work only an occasional night, your body rhythms should be set on the day shift. Your goal is to isolate any disruption to these body rhythms to one day. After working all night, come home and sleep for three or four hours eg 8 am to noon. Then force yourself to get up. This allows you to get at least a few hours of recuperative sleep without shifting your rhythms to a new time. That night, you will be sleepy enough to get to bed at your usual time. The next morning, you will be able to get up at your usual time, fully recovered.

Generally, it is best to sleep in one long sleep period and avoid inconsistent napping if you do have shorter sleep periods. Consistency should be the rule.

You can force wakefulness but you cannot force sleep. When you have trouble sleeping, get up and do something relaxing until you do feel sleepy. Then get up at your usual time - even if you have had a rough night. A regular wake time helps reset your body clock and leads to a more regular onset of sleep each night.

Make sure your sleep environment is conducive to sleep. Simulate night time if you are sleeping during the day. Use dark shades or heavy curtains, an eye-mask and ear plugs. Keep the room temperature cool and eliminate noise. Use an answering machine that is turned down and turn off the phone ringer.



Armed with effective adjustment strategies, you can avoid or alleviate many of the problems commonly associated with shift work and fully experience the benefits of working these schedules.

If you have having trouble developing adjusting tragedies, contact your EFAP.

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