

SHIFT WORK

The body has a natural rhythm which helps you sleep at night and stay alert during the day. Unfortunately, everyone who works at night is working against their normal body clock and changing from daytime function to night-time function is not easy. Not only does this impact on the shift worker but also on society, as long shifts and insufficient daytime sleep leads to chronic tiredness and accidents.

SHIFT WORKERS SLEEP MORE POORLY THAN OTHERS

Night shift workers have difficulty staying asleep in the daytime and workers who start in the early hours of the morning have difficulty getting to sleep in the evening. The reduction in sleep in many cases can be as much as four hours per day. The quality of sleep is also poor with a lot more awakenings. Although this may improve as the worker adapts to a shift, it never returns to normal and shift workers accumulate a large "sleep debt" over time.

SHIFT WORKERS ARE MORE TIRED THAN OTHERS

Tests have shown that shift workers are more tired both during and after shifts than daytime workers. This can cause poorer work performance. The resulting daytime tiredness and need to catch up on sleep impacts significantly on social aspects of the shift worker's life, leading to increased irritability and moodiness, forgetfulness, decreased concentration, lack of energy for family activities and ultimately to relationship problems.

SHIFT WORK CAUSES OTHER HEALTH PROBLEMS

In addition to the problems of tiredness and mood, studies have found shift workers suffer from more colds and flu, more gastro-intestinal problems such as indigestion or ulcers, more cardiovascular disease such as heart attacks and more risks for diabetes. Reasons for these health problems include increased stress, poor diet during shift work and increased smoking, caffeine consumption and



disturbed body clock function.

BEING TIRED CAUSES ACCIDENTS

More than one Australian dies every day from falling asleep at the wheel of a vehicle or from industrial accidents due to poor quality sleep and lack of sleep. Many significant accidents happen in the early hours of the morning when we should be asleep because shift workers are staying awake against their natural body clock. Research from the Centre for Sleep Research in Adelaide has shown that after 17 hours without sleep you drive as poorly as if you had a blood alcohol level of 0.05 and after 24 hours without sleep it is the same as a level of 0.10. Shift workers are at high risk for sleep-related accidents because at the end of their shift they may have been awake for 16 or more hours. Studies have found up to 30% of shift workers have had a fatigue related driving mishap in the previous year.

EMPLOYERS NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE EFFECTS OF SHIFT WORK

To minimise the effects on the health of the worker it is very important that the employer attempts to devise "sleep friendly" shifts. Quick shift changes should be avoided, shifts should rotate forwards (i.e. day to evening, evening to night) and schedules that involve a large number of consecutive shifts followed by several days off have been shown to be a problem. The

structure of work within the shift might also be changed to accommodate heavy or demanding work when workers are most alert. If the work allows, a scheduled opportunity for a nap may also assist.

SHIFT WORKERS MUST TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR GETTING ENOUGH SLEEP

There is simply no substitute for sleep. Workers must be responsible for ensuring that they get enough sleep and must accept that shift work will impact on their ability to have a normal day-time social life.

A "POWER NAP" MAY GET YOU OUT OF A DIFFICULT SITUATION

If your shift work involves driving or operating machinery and you are drowsy, it may be possible to take a nap break in the middle of the shift. If driving pull over to a quiet spot, recline the seat and take a nap of about 15-20 minutes, not longer. After the nap, get out of the vehicle and walk around for 5 minutes before continuing.

TIPS FOR GETTING A GOOD "DAYS" SLEEP

Paying particular attention to sleep hygiene issues is vital to sleeping well in the day. Some considerations are:

- Make time for adequate sleep. Don't fall into the trap of trying to lead a normal social life during the day and work at night. Avoid second jobs.
- Try go to bed at the same time every day.
- Screen out all distractions, phone calls and lights.
- Make sure people know not to disturb you.
- Keep the bedroom cool.
- Avoid caffeine, sleeping pills, alcohol or nicotine before bed.

- If you are in a noisy household, use foam ear plugs, insulate your bedroom with heavy drapes and carpets, and muffle noises with a fan or "white noise" machine.
- If possible, sleep before you work rather than earlier in the day and if this is not possible, consider taking a nap before you go to work.
- Try get light in the evening and during the night shift to maximise alertness.

ABOUT US

Sleep Disorders Australia (SDA) is a voluntary not-for-profit organisation that provides information and support to people affected by sleep disorders throughout Australia. SDA advocates the needs of people with sleep disorders by raising awareness of sleep disorders and their impact on our lives. We also offer support and education with regards to preventing and treating sleep disorders.

We would be delighted if you joined us. Membership is open to sufferers, family members, medical professionals, and the general public. You can join via our website or email our membership officer for more information.

If you would like to support us financially, you can donate via our website or send a cheque to our address.

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DISCLAIMER: Information in this fact sheet is general in nature. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Discuss with your doctor if you are concerned about your sleep or other medical conditions.

