

› Shift work safety: fatigue

Hazards include fatigue, lone worker, criminals, lighting, and experience levels.

Intro

Most people think of “work hours” as roughly between eight in the morning and five in the afternoon. However, more than 20 million Americans work a different schedule. Their workday either starts in the afternoon and ends late at night or begins late at night and ends sometime in the morning. If this applies to you, be aware that your safety is just as important as the day shift — but you may encounter conditions or hazards which are different from the day shift. The potential for injuries tends to be significantly higher on night shifts than during the day.

Challenges of shift work

- The type of work may be different. Some companies schedule inherently heavy or more hazardous work for night shifts when fewer people are around. This reduces overall risk for the company and its workers but not necessarily for the swing/night shift
- It is more difficult to see in the dark. Artificial light cannot illuminate every surface, which can result in more slips, trips, and falls. This also makes night driving more hazardous
- Shift work may result in psychological problems for shift workers who fail to eat, rest, and sleep adequately. Research indicates that shift workers may suffer from increased occurrence of depression, alcohol use, and even symptoms of physical illness
- The potential for criminal behavior may increase the need for security by both the company and employees, since the cover of darkness is often used to help people commit crimes
- Night workers who lack seniority for dayshift may be less experienced and less aware of safe work practices. This can make them more hazardous to themselves and others

Fatigue: the number one shift work safety problem

Your normal “body clock” wants you to be awake, alert, and productive during the daytime. It can be hard to adjust to a different schedule than what your body naturally wants. People who are “off-schedule” can feel tired and less alert. They are less likely to notice a potentially dangerous condition or to respond quickly in an emergency. For example, more than 50,000 motor vehicle accidents per year are believed to be caused by sleepy drivers. Perhaps it is no coincidence that disasters like Three Mile Island and Exxon Valdez happened at night.

Tips for dealing with fatigue

Engineering controls can help — such as improved lighting, ventilation, proper temperatures, and noise control. But the key to dealing with fatigue lies with individual employees who should:

- Keep a regular bedtime schedule. Your body can't adjust if you don't give it a chance
- Keep your bedroom dark and quiet. Have family or roommates cooperate with noise control
- Avoid excessive use of alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine — especially during pre-sleep hours
- If possible, avoid rotating shifts. This makes it more difficult for your body to adjust
- Eat regular meals, but don't consume a heavy meal right before bedtime. Instead, eat a light snack
- Maintain a regular exercise routine which improves sleep and helps reduce stress
- Most importantly, get enough sleep for your own, personal body needs
- Train supervisors/management to spot signs and symptoms of fatigue. Workers who chronically show up to work unalert are a hazard to themselves and other employees

Site specific requirements:

Employee participants:

Date:
