

Managing shift work

People vary in how they cope with shift work depending on their health, fitness, age, lifestyle, and responsibilities at home. There are ways to help to make shift work more manageable.

Alertness at Work

On some shifts, such as nights and very early mornings you may find it difficult to remain alert and this can affect your performance. It may also increase the risk of errors, injury and accidents. You may find it helpful to:

- Take moderate exercise before starting work which may increase your alertness during the shift.
- Take regular short breaks during the shift if possible- and access brighter lights during this time.
- Get up and walk around during breaks.
- Plan to do more stimulating work at the times you feel most drowsy.

Driving to and from work

Driving to and from work can be risky, particularly after a long shift, a night shift or before an early start. The following strategies may make driving safer:

- Consider alternatives for travel: using public transport.
- Exercise briefly before your journey- take a brief walk.
- Stop if you feel sleepy and take a short nap if it is safe to do so.
- After a night shift consider wearing sunglasses whilst travelling to enable sleep when you reach home.

Identify a suitable sleep schedule

Most adults need 7-8 hours sleep a day although this may decrease with age. If you cannot do this, try to rest, as this is still beneficial.

- If you work regular shifts, try going to bed at different times e.g. soon after you arrive back from work or stay up and sleep before the next shift.
- Have a short sleep before your first night shift.
- If coming off night shifts, have a short sleep and go to bed earlier that night.
- Try to keep to a sleep schedule that works for you.

Look for further useful resources: <https://anaesthetists.org/Fatigue>
<https://www.med.scot.nhs.uk/wellbeing/fatigue-and-rest-resources>
Micheal Farquhar's work, e.g. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.k202>



Make the environment favourable for sleeping

- Sleep in your bedroom and avoid using it for other activities such as watching television, eating and working.
- Create darkness- use heavy curtains, blackout blinds.
- Switch off your phone.
- Ask your household not to disturb you.
- Consider using earplugs, white noise or background music to mask external noises.
- Make sure the temperature is comfortable, cool conditions improve sleep.

Techniques to promote sleep

- Go for a short walk, relax with a book, listen to music and/or take a hot bath before going to bed.
- Avoid vigorous exercise before sleep as it is stimulating and raises the body temperature.
- Avoid caffeine, 'energy' drinks and other stimulants a few hours before bedtime. Choose foods that are easy to digest such as pasta, rice, bread, salad, fruit, vegetables and milk products.
- Don't go to bed feeling hungry: have a light meal or snack before sleeping.
- Avoid alcohol as it lowers the quality of sleep.
- An unhealthy lifestyle combined with shift work may increase the likelihood of sleep disorders and sleep loss or exacerbate existing sleep problems. A good diet, regular meals and exercise can improve sleep quality, health and well-being.