

# LIVING LIFE AS A SHIFT WORKER

The human body wants to be alert during the day. Disrupting its “biologic clock” can complicate the lives of shift workers. The “graveyard shift,” 11 p.m. to 7 a.m., is most problematic, followed by the 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. shift. Shift work has many benefits, but challenges are adverse if you don’t manage their negative effects.

## Circadian Rhythm

■ The human body follows a 24-hour cycle, called a circadian rhythm, determined by daylight and darkness. Your blood pressure, temperature, heart rate, and breathing rate are affected by this biological phenomenon.

## Create a New Cycle

■ Sleep restores the body and benefits mental health. If you work nights, you may come home exhausted but unable to sleep, or you may not reach the deep phase called “delta sleep.” It can help to establish a new and regular cycle. Try having breakfast with your family, and then fall asleep. Do not use caffeine before going to sleep. Use the same schedule on your days off.

## Sleep Problems

■ Shift work sleep disorder (SWSD) has been defined by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine as insomnia during daytime or excessive sleepiness while working. About 14 percent of all shift workers suffer from SWSD. To avoid SWSD, get at least six hours of sleep before or after your shift. Eight hours is preferable. Disrupted sleep patterns cause many health problems.

## Health Issues

■ Poor diet from meals caught on the run can lead to indigestion, heartburn, and other health problems. Epilepsy, diabetes and depression can be made worse by shift work. Eye fatigue, muscle pain, and mental exhaustion can lead to accidents on the job. Long 12-

hour shifts can expose workers to more chemical substances as well as more noise and vibration, depending on the job.

## Balance Risks with Healthy Habits

■ Structure a healthy lifestyle. Get exercise. Try walking or working out before your shift. Bring carrots, celery, or low-fat pretzels for snacks. Avoid heavy meals in the early morning hours that can disturb restful sleep when you get home. Recreate on your days off with family and friends—other shift workers and non-work friends.

## Managing Family Life

■ Having less time to spend with your family can cause tension. Children’s activities and school events can be missed. It’s easy to feel out of the loop. Decrease this feeling by connecting with family by phone during breaks, leaving notes for your spouse or children, and catching up by making breakfast a time to be together before heading off to sleep.

## Avoiding Danger

■ Sleepy workers are less productive and prone to injuries on the job. You may have to fight your body’s natural inclination to sleep during darkness. Be careful from 3:30 a.m. to 5:30 a.m. because it can be the most fatiguing time period.

## DO ...

- Do wear sunglasses driving home.
- To sleep, do use blackout shades, earplugs, or “white noise.”



- Do have a set routine for sleep.
- Do silence phones, answering machines, and doorbells.
- Do educate family and friends about your schedule.
- Do avoid caffeine toward the end of your shift.
- Do see a sleep specialist if needed.

## DON'T ...

- Do not become dependent on sleep medications.
- Do not smoke to stay awake.
- Do not drink alcohol to get to sleep.
- Do not substitute salty, fatty snack foods to make up for missed meals.
- Do not depend on coffee to keep you awake on the job.
- Avoid work tasks at the end of your shift that demand your utmost attention.
- Do not eat fatty meals high in protein in early morning hours.
- Do not drive if you fear falling asleep on the road. Take a short nap. Try carpooling.