Time management for shift workers

As many as 80 per cent of shift workers experience personal, social and medical problems related to their work schedules. Irritability, fatigue, loss of energy and stress are just a few of these problems. However, there are steps to minimize these effects.



Understanding shift stress

Adjustment to shift work is based on the circadian rhythm—the 24-hour cycle of alertness and rest regulated by the brain's biological clock. As light enters the eyes, it stimulates a tiny mass of nervous tissue, which in turn suppresses the pineal gland that produces melatonin. This substance causes the body to prepare for rest.

There is 10 times as much melatonin at night than there is during the light of day. When more melatonin is produced, a cascade of chemicals that affects blood, glands, digestion, brain waves, body temperature, general alertness and level of arousal is produced. It can be extremely difficult to fight this physiological switch that induces rest and sleep.

Coping with shift work

Studies show that the best shift schedules move clockwise or forward (e.g., morning to evening to night) rather than counter-clockwise. Regardless of your shift changes, managing your sleep, even if it must come during daylight, is the key to avoiding shift stress. Try some of the following to help you sleep at any time:

- Relax without caffeine, sleeping pills, alcohol or nicotine before going to bed
- Make sure all distractions, phone calls and lights are screened out
- Keep your bedroom temperature comfortable
- Use earplugs and masks to block out sound and light
- Use heavy or “blackout” drapes to block out light
- If possible, soundproof your room—heavy carpeting can help muffle noise
- Use a fan or a "white noise" machine to block out other sounds
- Go to bed with an empty bladder

Strategies to help you maintain a normal schedule during your waking hours include:

- Try to go to bed at the same time every day, even if it is an odd time or if it means making adjustments to your social life on your days off. Give up the notion of trying to switch to a “normal” schedule on your one or two days off.

- If you must be up at different hours on days off, try just going halfway. Overlap half your usual work period with sleep. For example, if your usual shift is midnight to 8 a.m., stay awake until 4 a.m. and then sleep till noon. It will be easier than making a total transition, but will buy you some extra daytime.

- Plan social events around your ideal sleep schedule. This can be a challenge but it's better than shocking your body rhythms when you return to work.

- Make sure your family and friends are aware of your schedule, and that you've worked out quality time to spend with them.

- If you have children who need attention while you're sleeping, try to arrange for suitable child care to allow you enough rest time.

- Try taking a nap of at least 30 minutes just before going to work.

- After a night shift, go to bed as soon as you're relaxed enough to fall asleep, even if you feel you could stay up for hours.

Diet and health play an important role in avoiding stress and maintaining energy through a difficult schedule. Remember to:

- Drink enough fluids to avoid dehydration
- Limit your caffeine intake and stop drinking caffeinated beverages four or five hours before your ideal sleep time
- Eat light and healthy at night
- Get extra energy from vegetables, cereal, rice, pasta, fruits and juices. Cut down on sweets and fats.
- Eat several small meals throughout the day, if possible, rather than one or two large ones
- Always eat lightly, if at all, toward the end of your shift
- Make time for exercise. The last thing you may want to do while working shifts is work out, but regular exercise is crucial in maintaining your health.

Shift work can take a toll on alertness and response times as well.

Take extra care to:

- Follow your workplace procedures carefully. Errors are more likely at night.
- Take all permitted breaks at work to keep fresh and alert.
- Drive carefully after a night shift, as more accidents happen after dark.

With some adjustments and looking after yourself, you can avoid a lot of the stress and burnout that often comes from working shifts. People react differently to shift stress, though. An estimated five to 10 per cent of the population simply can't tolerate shift work. If you are still having difficulties coping with shift stress, you may need to talk to your employer or consider changing jobs as a long-term solution.