

USC Center for Work & Family Life

Tips for Healthy Eating and Exercising When Working Shifts

When you're working a shift schedule, your eating and exercise habits can suffer. People who work shifts sometimes skip meals, eat irregularly, eat unhealthy food, and may find it hard to keep up a regular exercise schedule.

Shift workers are at higher risk for weight gain and heart disease as well. Healthy eating and exercise help improve your sleep and your overall health. These ten easy tips can help you stay healthy even with an irregular or shift work schedule.

- 1 **Have healthy foods readily available at home and at work.** People who are sleepy are more likely to reach for unhealthy foods. Stock your kitchen with easy-to-eat raw vegetables (baby carrots, apple slices) and hummus, fruits (bananas, oranges), or a container of raw almonds and raisins (versus a muffin or cookies), so that when you're tired but hungry, you make healthy food choices. If you like carbs, consider whole grains and "slow burning" foods like brown rice, wild rice, and rolled oats that keep you full and productive for longer stretches.
- 2 **Prepare meals before your shift,** so they're ready to eat when you get home. Experiment with crock-pot meals (which can cook foods over a long period of time) or try freezing portion sizes of your favorite healthy meals for easy access when you don't have time to cook.
- 3 **Bring your own food to work.** You're more likely to eat healthily if you pack your own meals rather than eating foods from restaurants, take out counters or vending machines.
- 4 **Eat small, frequent meals as opposed to large heavy ones.** Heavy meals often have more calories than most people need in one sitting. Eating a large portion can also make you feel sluggish or tired while on the job.
- 5 **Try to eat in line with a regular day** (and your circadian rhythm). It's hard to stick to a regular diet if you eat very late at night or throughout a shift.
- 6 **Sit down to eat.** Pause for meals. Eat at a relaxed pace. Eating on the go or in front of a computer encourages mindless snacking.
- 7 **Moderate your caffeine consumption.** Limit caffeine intake four to five hours before the end of your shift (caffeine stays in your body for many hours) to help your body wind down for home and relaxation.

- 8 **Drink plenty of fluids.** Your body often signals hunger and thirst in the same way. Bring a water bottle to work and fill it often. Not only will you save money on bottled drinks, but you'll treat your body as well. Infuse your water with fruit or a citrus slice for an added flavor boost without the calories.
- 9 **Exercise moderately.** Try to take walks, walk up and down stairs, or stretch before or after your shift or during your breaks. People who exercise not only burn more calories during the day, but they sleep better as well.
- 10 **Get the sleep you need.** People who sleep the recommended seven to nine hours each day are healthier, fitter, and less likely to suffer from obesity or other health issues than those who don't sleep well. Remember that you can space out sleep with naps if a single period of rest isn't possible with your schedule.