

Tips for Shift Workers to Improve Their Sleep

Working non-traditional hours is more common than you might think. Although not everyone who works odd hours has shift work sleep disorder, a lot can be at stake. People with shift work disorder have higher rates of absenteeism and accidents related to sleepiness than night workers without the disorder.

Memory and ability to focus can become impaired, and shift workers who are sleep-deprived often get irritable or depressed. Their relationships and social life can suffer, too. Shift workers also face potential health problems, researchers have found. Overall, those who work night or rotating shifts seem to have a higher risk of ulcers, insulin resistance, metabolic syndrome, and heart disease.

Things that can help increase quality of sleep

Perfect your sleep hygiene. Maintaining a consistent sleep schedule is one of the many aspects of proper sleep hygiene, which is especially important for night shift workers who are fighting their own natural rhythm for daytime zzz's. Boost your odds for a good day's worth of sleep. For starters, make your room dark and quiet, which may be tough during the daytime. Try soundproofing your room, investing in light-blocking shades and turning off your phone.

Nap strategically. Ideally, night shift workers can rack up all their sleep during one block of the day, but sometimes it just doesn't happen. A well-timed nap, say an hour long doze right before work, can help them stay alert throughout their upcoming shift

Stick to your schedule. Even on days you don't work, continue to stay awake at night and sleep during the day. It's hard work to reprogram your system to do the opposite of what it's supposed to, and flipping to a conventional schedule can "wreak havoc" on the progress you've made. Anytime you lose or break routine, you might be battling to retain it again. Be as consistent as possible with your sleep schedule by waking up and going to bed at the same times each day.

Working Shifts: 9 Tips for Better Sleep

If your job requires that you work the night shift or hours other than the traditional 9 to 5, you need to pay close attention to your sleep. These tips can help you get good sleep:

1. Try not to work a number of night shifts in a row. You may become increasingly more sleep-deprived over several nights on the job. You're more likely to recover if you can limit night shifts and schedule days off in between.
2. Avoid frequently rotating shifts. If you can't, it's easier to adjust to a schedule that rotates from day shift to evening to night rather than the reverse order.
3. Try to avoid long commutes that take time away from sleeping.
4. Keep your workplace brightly lighted to promote alertness. If you're working the night shift, expose yourself to bright light, such as that from special light boxes, lamps, and visors designed for people with circadian-related sleep problems, when you wake up. Circadian rhythms are the body's internal clock that tells us when to be awake and when to sleep. These rhythms are controlled by a part of the brain that is influenced by light. Fleming says that being exposed to bright light when you start your "day" can help train your body's internal clock to adjust.
5. Limit caffeine. Drinking a cup of coffee at the beginning of your shift will help promote alertness. But don't consume caffeine later in the shift or you may have trouble falling asleep when you get home.
6. Avoid bright light on the way home from work, which will make it easier for you to fall asleep once you hit the pillow. Wear dark, wraparound sunglasses and a hat to shield yourself from sunlight. Don't stop to run errands, tempting as that may be.
7. Stick to a regular sleep-wake schedule as much as you can.
8. Ask your family to limit phone calls and visitors during your sleep hours.
9. Use blackout blinds or heavy curtains to block sunlight when you sleep during the day. "Sunlight is a potent stimulator of the circadian rhythm," Fleming says. "Even if your eyes are closed, the sunlight coming into the room tells your brain that it's daytime. Yet your body is exhausted and you're trying to sleep. That discrepancy ... is not a healthy thing for the body to be exposed to."