



MALE HEALTH AT THE WORKPLACE

An initiative of the Irish Men's Sheds Association



Men in the Workplace – Addressing Sleep & Fatigue

The working environment has now extended into our everyday lives, with the development of an 'always-on' culture. We have all checked our work emails or mobiles when we step out of the office. However, not having enough time to switch off before bed can often leave us feeling stressed and unable to sleep.

Our sleep is also influenced by our 'sleep cycle'. Despite popular beliefs that the early bird catches the worm and is perceived as more productive, the night owl is just as productive when workplaces provide flexible working hours to cater for employee work life balance.

How much do we really know about our sleep requirements, the impact of not getting enough sleep, the impact of work shifts and how it affects fatigue and concentration in the workplace? This leaflet seeks to look at why we need to prioritise getting enough sleep, how to improve sleep quality, decrease fatigue and reduce health risks as a result.



**7 to 9
HOURS**



Sleep – How much do we really need?

The quality of sleep men get varies depending on a number of things such as health, age, lifestyle, fitness and domestic responsibilities. While a lack of sleep can have a negative impact on your health, the quality of sleep can have a bigger impact.

You can be sleep deprived even though you may sleep the recommended 7-9 hours per night because you're not getting enough quality sleep. If you have any of the following problems, you're probably not getting enough restful sleep:

- It takes you a long time to fall asleep once you go to bed
- You wake up multiple times throughout the night
- You wake up feeling tired



According to the National Institute of Health USA, lack of restful sleep causes a list of issues:

- Higher rates of obesity, blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, Alzheimer's disease, certain cancers, and diabetes.
- Higher rates of depression and anxiety.
- Poor mood, energy and motivation.
- Decreased focus, memory and decision-making abilities.
- Decreased coordination, athletic performance and higher rates of accidents.
- Lower levels of self-control, irritability, and more relationship problems.
- Inability to manage stress - small problems feel like much larger problems.
- Lowered immune function, frequent colds.
- Gastrointestinal disorders.
- Decreased sex drive.

While we can't change our inbuilt characteristics, it is possible to change our behaviour or make lifestyle changes that make our working day more productive.

The following hints and tips on the next page draw on commonly available advice and best practice from a range of sources and may improve sleep quality, increase alertness and reduce health risks for men at work.

Fatigue in the Workplace

Fatigue is a state of 'weariness' caused by prolonged or intensive work. In a work context, fatigue is mental and/or physical exhaustion that reduces your ability to perform your work safely and effectively. Fatigue can be described as either acute (usually reversed by sleep and relaxation) or chronic (the constant, severe state of tiredness not relieved by rest). Fatigue is known to increase with:

- Dim lighting.
- Limited visual acuity (e.g. due to weather).
- High temperatures.
- Loud noises.
- Tasks that must be sustained for long periods of time.
- Tasks that are long, repetitive, difficult, boring or monotonous.

Shift work

Most adults need 7-9 hours sleep a day, although this may decrease with age. If this isn't possible, try to rest, as this is still beneficial. Recording sleep patterns and problems using a diary may help to explain fatigue and tiredness. It can also be used to help find the most suitable strategies and conditions for a better quality of sleep.

- 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.
- once you have identified a suitable sleep schedule try to keep to it.



Sleep loss and fatigue are some of the most significant problems particularly for shift workers. It is important to try and maintain your normal level of sleep and rest. Daytime sleep is usually lighter, shorter and of poorer quality than night-time sleep. It is more frequently disturbed because of warmer temperatures and daytime noise. To help make the environment favourable for sleeping:

- Sleep in your bedroom and avoid using it for other activities such as watching television, eating etc.
- Use heavy curtains, blackout blinds or eye shades to darken the bedroom.
- Disconnect the phone or use an answering machine and turn the ringer down.
- Ask your family not to disturb you and to keep the noise down when you are sleeping.
- Discuss your work pattern with close neighbours and ask them to try and avoid noisy activities during your sleep time.
- If it is too noisy to sleep consider using earplugs, white noise or background music to mask external noises.
- Adjust the bedroom temperature to a comfortable level, cool conditions improve sleep.

Techniques to promote sleep

To help you sleep, try follow a similar routine to the one you follow before a normal night's sleep. The following tips may help you relax after work and sleep better:

- Go for a short walk, relax with a book, listen to music or take a hot bath before going to bed.
- Avoid vigorous exercise before sleep, as it is stimulating and raises the body temperature.
- Avoid drinks high in caffeine and other stimulants a few hours before bedtime as they can prevent you from sleeping.
- Have a light meal or snack before sleeping. Make sure to avoid fatty, spicy and heavy meals as these are more difficult to digest and can disturb sleep.
- Limit your exposure to bright lights such as reading lights, smartphones or laptops, ideally two hours before you go to sleep.
- Avoid alcohol as it lowers the quality of sleep.



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 using public transport or taxis rather than driving;
- Exercise briefly before your journey.
- Car pool, if possible.
- Drive carefully and defensively.
- Take a break if you feel tired
- Make occasional use of caffeine or 'energy' drinks;
- Identify a suitable sleep schedule

If you are feeling sleepy while driving, you should:

- Stop, park in a safe place and take a nap for 15 minutes (set your mobile phone alarm). This is the most important tactic;
- To really make the most of the break, take a caffeine drink before the nap (150mg of caffeine e.g. 2 cups of coffee). After the nap, the caffeine should have started to take effect;
- Get some fresh air and stretch your legs for a few minutes;
- By following all of the above advice you should be able to drive for another hour or so.

Diet

It is important to consider the timing and quality of your meals. Digestive problems are common in shift workers due to disruption of the body clock and poor diet. Plan your meals to help you stay alert at work and to relax/sleep when you need to rest.

- Regular light meals/snacks are less likely to affect alertness or cause drowsiness than a single heavy meal.
- Choose foods that are easy to digest such as pasta, rice, bread, salad, fruit, vegetables and milk products.
- Avoid fatty, spicy and/or heavy meals as these are more difficult to digest. They can also make you feel drowsy and disrupt your sleep when you need rest.
- Avoid sugary foods, such as chocolate – they provide a short-term energy boost followed by a dip in energy levels.
- Fruit and vegetables are good snacks as their sugar is converted into energy relatively slowly and they also provide vitamins, minerals and fibre.
- Drink plenty of fluid as dehydration can reduce both mental and physical performance but avoid drinking too much fluid before sleeping as this may overload the bladder.



Physical fitness and a healthier lifestyle

An unhealthy lifestyle combined with shift work or long working days may increase the likelihood of sleep disorders, sleep loss or exacerbate existing sleep problems. A good diet, regular meals and exercise can improve sleep quality, health and well-being.

- You can improve your fitness by spending 30 minutes a day on a physical activity including housework and walking. Consider joining a gym or taking part in a regular exercise class.
- Eat healthy meals on a regular basis.
- Cut down or give up smoking.
- Reduce your alcohol intake.

Ways to improve your 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:

- Exercise before starting work which may increase your alertness during the shift.
- Keep the light bright.
- Take regular, short breaks during the shift if possible.
- Get up and walk around during breaks.
- Plan to do more stimulating work at the times you feel most drowsy.
- If possible, do the lightest/easiest tasks between 4am and 6am.
- Talk with colleagues as this may help both you and them stay alert.

Stimulants and sedatives

We can sometimes turn stimulants like coffee/caffeine to stay awake and sedatives like alcohol or sleeping pills to help us sleep. These should be avoided as they provide a short-term effect and you may develop a tolerance to these and a risk of dependence.

Only use caffeine occasionally and don't rely on it to keep you awake. If you do decide to take caffeine or other stimulants, you should consider what might happen when its effects wear off e.g. when you are operating machinery or driving.

Although alcohol can promote the onset of sleep it is also associated with earlier awakenings, disrupted sleep and poorer sleep quality. Regularly drinking too much increases the risk of long-term damage to your physical and mental health, your work, social and personal relationships.

Regular use of sleeping pills and other sedatives to aid sleep are not recommended because they can lead to dependency and addiction.

New drugs have recently been developed that can alter our state of alertness. Although their use may be widespread abroad, the ways in which they work, and their long-term effects are not yet fully understood and consequently their use is not advised unless under medical supervision.



Good practice guidelines for the work environment:

- Provide similar facilities as those available during daytime and allow shift workers time for training and development.
- Provide training and information on the risks of shift work and ensure supervisors and management can recognise problems and fatigue.
- Consider increasing supervision during periods of low alertness.
- Control overtime, shift swapping and on-call duties and discourage workers from taking second jobs.
- Set standards and allow time for communication at shift handovers.
- Encourage interaction between workers and provide a means of contact for lone workers.
- Encourage workers to tell their GPs that they are shift workers and provide free health assessments for night workers.
- Ensure the workplace and surroundings are well lit, safe and secure.
- Ensure the work environments have reasonable noise levels.
- If extended hours and overtime are common, consider the time required for employees to commute from home, and workers should allow time for meal preparation, eating and socialising.

Employers Responsibility

Employers have a duty to ensure employees are safe at work, as fatigue is a workplace hazard that must be managed. All responsible employers should have basic arrangements in place to reduce risks from staff fatigue. This is the case even if there is no shift work and no significant overtime.

In organisations where judgment, quick reactions and safety-critical roles are key, employers and employees must be educated about the risks of working long hours and dealing with associated fatigue. This must include ways to avoid adverse outcomes and errors, and signs and symptoms of both long- and short-term health issues.

Workplaces can help by providing environments that have good lighting, comfortable temperatures and reasonable noise levels. Work tasks should provide a variety of interest and should change throughout the shift.

Sources:

Adapted with the permission of the Health and Safety Executive UK and licensed under the Open Government Licence. www.hse.gov.uk/humanfactors/topics/fatigue.htm

Sleep Station: www.sleepstation.org.uk

Safe Work Australia: www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/fatigue



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