Fatigue at Work – A Safety Nightmare in the Making

What's at Stake?

Fatigue is the state of feeling very tired, weary or sleepy. It results from not getting enough sleep, shiftwork, prolonged mental or physical work, or extended periods of stress or anxiety. Fatigue impacts work performance and safety and can cause health problems. In the most extreme cases, fatigue has been linked to environmental disasters, plane and train crashes, nuclear disasters and the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle.

What's the Danger?

The risk of making mistakes at work increases dramatically if workers sleep for less than seven to eight hours, or are awake for more than 17 consecutive hours.

- Fatigue reduces your ability to make decisions and to do complex planning. Communication skills and your ability to respond to and remember directions and recall details also suffer.
- Fatigue slows your reaction time, and your ability to respond to changes in surroundings or information provided. It also shortens your attention span, especially during boring or mundane tasks.
- Fatigue lowers your productivity and performance and your ability to handle stress. It makes it hard to stay awake, increases forgetfulness and increases errors in judgment.

Experiencing one or more of these factors can make you dangerous to work with, because it increases the chances for incidents and injuries.

How to Protect Yourself

One of the most important ways to protect against fatigue is to get enough rest. For most people that means seven to eight hours of sleep per night.

Try these tips for getting a good night's sleep:

- Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, even on weekends.

- Don’t eat too close to bedtime, as doing so can cause heartburn and just generally make it hard to fall asleep. Do eat a balanced diet of fruits, veggies, healthy fats, proteins and whole grains.
- Turn off your cell phone or tablet at least one hour before you go to sleep and don’t watch TV in bed.
- Exercise regularly, but not too close to bed time. Exercising an hour or so before bed can make it hard to fall asleep.
- Avoid caffeine, tobacco and alcohol before bed as well. Stay away from foods and drinks that contain caffeine for at least five hours before bedtime.
- Keep your room dark and cool. Most of us sleep better in a cooler room.
- If you can’t sleep, get up and go into another room and read or perform some other quiet activity that doesn’t involve staring at a screen until you feel sleepy.

At work, remember these fatigue-triggering factors and try to avoid them:

- Dim lighting.
- High temperatures, high noise, and high comfort, such as sitting for long periods in a very comfortable chair.
- Repetitive, long, boring and monotonous tasks.

If you can, take breaks or break up tasks and keep the lights bright. Eat light, healthy snacks throughout your shift instead of heavy, fatty snacks. If you’re driving, be sure to take breaks at least every few hours and change drivers if you can.

Final Word

Fatigue at work doesn’t have to turn into a nightmare of injuries and accidents. Take care of yourself by getting enough sleep, eating right and knowing the factors that trigger fatigue.