Fatigue Meeting Kit



WHAT IS FATIGUE?

Fatigue can be broadly defined as a feeling of weariness, tiredness or lack of energy. Fatigue is a common complaint but, medically speaking, it’s recognized more as a symptom or cause of other conditions than as a condition itself. The best way to understand fatigue is along a continuum. On one end of the spectrum is the fatigue that most of us occasionally experience in the course of our lives when we get physically or mentally overburdened. This kind of fatigue isn’t serious and can usually be resolved simply and quickly, such as by getting extra rest. On the other end is a less common but more serious form of fatigue that’s symptomatic of a more chronic and disabling condition, such as major depressive disorder or chronic fatigue syndrome. This form of fatigue is an acute and/or ongoing state of tiredness that leads to mental or physical exhaustion and prevents people from functioning as usual.

HARMS/DANGERS OF FATIGUE

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.

Fatigue slows your reaction time, and your ability to respond to changes in surroundings or information provided.

Fatigue lowers your productivity and performance and your ability to handle stress.

Fatigue lowers your overall well-being and increases the risks for illnesses and diseases.

Fatigue can also lead to involuntary micro-sleeps, or brief periods of unconsciousness, that can last two to thirty seconds. These episodes can mimic the effects of being under the influence of alcohol. Eighteen hours without sleep is similar to the effects of a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.05, while 24 hours without sleep is similar to a BAC of 0.10. These effects can be especially dangerous when operating machinery or driving.

FATIGUE – A WORKPLACE ISSUE. Everyone should be concerned about the impact of

fatigue as it can be considered a form of impairment, making fatigue a workplace hazard.

Fatigue is increased by:

- dim lighting,
- limited visual acuity (i.e., due to weather),
- high temperatures,
- high noise,
- high comfort,
- tasks which must be sustained for long periods of time,
- work tasks which are long, repetitive, boring and
- monotonous.

On the job, fatigued employees may:

- have delayed reaction times, and work more slowly
- show poor judgment
- take more risks
- be less motivated, more forgetful and prefer simpler tasks
- have trouble concentrating, and need to double-check their work often perform poorly at complex tasks

SLEEP AND FATIGUE AT WORK. Research studies have shown that when workers have slept for less than 5 hours before work or when workers have been awake for more than 16 hours, their chance of making mistakes at work due to fatigue are significantly increased.

Research has shown that the number of hours awake can be similar to blood alcohol levels. One study reports the following:

- 17 hours awake is equivalent to a blood alcohol content of 0.05
- 21 hours awake is equivalent to a blood alcohol content of 0.08 (legal limit in Canada)
- 24-25 hours awake is equivalent to a blood alcohol content of 0.10

Fatigue is regarded as having an impact on work performance. Most incidents occur when people are more likely to want sleep – between midnight and 6 am, and between 1 to 3 pm. Fatigue affects people differently but it can increase a worker’s hazard exposure by:

- reducing mental and physical functioning,
- impairing judgement and concentration,
- lowering motivation,
- slowing reaction time,
- increasing risk-taking behaviour.

BEST PRACTICES TO PROTECT AGAINST FATIGUE

- 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. Exercising an hour or so before bed can make it hard to fall asleep.
- 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.
- If taking medication, review your medications with your doctor to see if they disrupt sleep.
- Protect your sleep with darkened rooms, cooler temperatures, and comfortable bedding.
- Postpone chores, place your phone on silent, and minimize sleep disruptions.
- Take a quick rest break during your work shift or before you commute home.
- Keep your work environment bright, cool, and vary your tasks to maintain your alertness.
- Seek medical attention for sleep disorders (e.g. sleep apnea) that can disrupt your sleep.

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.