Shifting Into Night Shift Safely



In many industries, falling asleep on the job for even 30 seconds can cause a serious mistake. Yet studies show that 30 to 50% of night shift workers report falling asleep at least once a week while on the job. Sleep issues affect truck and bus drivers, airline pilots, factory workers, police, emergency workers, healthcare providers, hotel employees and anyone else on night or changing shifts.

The body has high and low points every 24-hour period. Body and brain functions slow down during the nighttime and early morning in a pattern known as circadian rhythms. Working while the body is at its low point is stressful and fatiguing, increasing the risk of accidents. In fact, according to one study, workers who work night or rotating shifts may be twice as likely to get hurt on the job as workers on day shifts. Fatigue also impairs judgment, making the workplace less safe for others, too.

Air traffic control services at Washington Ronald Reagan National Airport were briefly interrupted in the early hours of March 23, 2011, requiring two flights to land at the airport without any assistance from the tower. Investigators later determined that the supervisory controller, who had 20 years of experience, had been alone in the control tower and was on his fourth consecutive overnight shift. He'd fallen asleep while on duty.

Sleep Better

- Try to sleep the same hours whether you're working or off-shift. If this is not possible, have at least four hours of your two sleep schedules overlapping.
- Arrange your bedroom for sleeping comfort. Heavy drapes, insulated window coverings or aluminum foil can reduce the light and noise and help maintain a comfortable temperature. If outside noises wake you up, sleep with the radio on low volume or a fan running to muffle these sounds.
- Write down worries on a piece of paper before you go to sleep.
- Don't use alcohol to help you sleep. While it might make you drowsy, the resulting sleep is often interrupted by wakefulness later.
- Before bed, soak in a warm bathtub, listen to music, read, meditate or watch television.
- Avoid vigorous exercise within a couple of hours before bed, because exercise speeds up metabolism.
- Avoid going to bed hungry. A light snack can relax you.
- Let other people know about your sleep schedule so they will not disturb you. Post a calendar of your shifts at home to help your family plan around

your work and sleep schedule.

Work Safer

- Dim lights can make you sleepy, so turn up the lights in your work area.
- Lower the temperature to help you stay alert, but not to the point where you’re uncomfortably cool.
- If possible, take fresh-air breaks.
- Vary your tasks.
- Work with special care on overnight shifts, keeping in mind you may not be as alert as usual or have the same quick reflexes. Double-check your work and equipment. Use checklists for longer or complicated tasks.
- Be honest about fatigue. If you’re too tired to work safely, tell your supervisor.

Shiftworkers face many challenges, including physical and mental fatigue. Use healthy coping strategies to make shiftwork safe and successful for you and those around you.