

Self-Care When Shift Working

Shift work is a particular pattern of work that can have an impact on many aspects of your life. In a document published in 2012, the Health & Safety Authority estimated that 15% of the work force, or 270,000 people, worked shifts on a regular basis.¹ Due to the current health crisis, new shift arrangements may be in place, and some staff may be experiencing shift working for the first time. Both positive and negative consequences can be experienced by shift workers.

Advantages:

- Shift hours may be convenient for some lifestyle choices
- A quieter journey to work
- May suit an individual's, or their family's circumstances
- Avoiding peak times for shopping, etc.
- Variety - being different from the 'normal routine'
- There may be other incentives including pay or overtime

Disadvantages:

- Shift work can disrupt circadian rhythms, the natural body clock functions, causing sleep difficulties and fatigue
- Public transport may be curtailed or unavailable
- May not be family or socially friendly
- Some may experience stress adjusting to shift rota
- Tiredness during shifts may lead to errors and accidents
- Health risks including worsening of pre-existing conditions or serious illnesses (can impact mental and physical health)

Factors such as life stage, lifestyle habits and mind-set can play a role in how shift workers may be impacted. With good self-care and lifestyle management the risks can be minimised. Furthermore, cooperation between staff and management can reduce the risk of errors and accidents at work.

General Tips:

- Plan your week in advance, taking account of the hours you will be working
- Organise and prioritise personal lives as much as possible
- Ensure you have a healthy and balanced diet
- Develop a healthy sleep routine that promotes rest and restoration
- Make time to exercise daily, especially if your work is of a sedentary nature
- If you are over- burdened, delegate tasks where possible
- Report hazards or problems to management as soon as they arise
- If driving, take care to be alert travelling to/from work. Take rests if required. Do not drive if overtired

¹ Health & Safety Authority (2012). Guidance for Employers and Employees on Shift Work and Night Work

- Seek help and support if you are experiencing difficulties

Tips for the Shift:

- Be clear on role and tasks – ask for clarification if required
- Stay well hydrated - this aids concentration
- Bring enough food to keep you nourished for the shift, and to avoid hunger
- Notice what works in restoring energy, e.g. healthy snacks like fruit, water, fresh air, a short walk
- Notice patterns of tiredness and alertness
- When finished the shift, leave work behind and switch off

Staying Alert at Work

It can be challenging to stay alert and focused while shift working but, there are actions you can take to help. Being hydrated and eating a nutritious diet can be energising and can promote optimum functioning. Some gentle exercise before work can boost energy and alertness. Suitable levels of lighting, temperature and ventilation in the workplace are all conducive to better focus. If you find yourself becoming fatigued, switching to work which is more stimulating, can help you to refocus.

Nutrition

The Health Service Executive (HSE) recommends using the food pyramid for a guide on the kinds of food you need to eat and for portion sizes.² Eating a 'rainbow' of different coloured fruit and vegetables can help to ensure that you get sufficient vitamins, minerals and fibre. Staying hydrated is important for concentration and for both mental and physical health.

When shift working, light meals may be preferable as eating heavy meals can induce drowsiness. Complex carbohydrates, like whole grains and legumes (beans, peas and lentils etc.) are more filling than simple carbs and release energy over a longer period of time, keeping you full and fuelled for longer.

Exercise

It is well documented that physical exercise helps to sustain muscular and cardiorespiratory health, while boosting energy levels and reducing the risk of many serious illnesses. What may be less well known are the multiple benefits for mental health, including defending against depression, improving memory and enhancing our learning ability.

The HSE³ and the World Health Organisation⁴ (WHO) suggest a target of 150 minutes per week of moderate exercise for all adults. This can be broken up in to three 10 minute periods

² Health Service Executive. Healthy Eating Guidelines. Retrieved from <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthwellbeing/our-priority-programmes/health/healthy-eating-guidelines/>

³ Health Service Executive, (2020). Physical Activity Guidelines. Retrieved from <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthwellbeing/our-priority-programmes/health/physical-activity-guidelines/>

⁴ World Health Organisation, (2020). Physical Activity and Adults. Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/factsheet_adults/en/

of activity per day. It's a good idea to schedule some exercise time into your day, and to set goals.

Sleep

A regular sleep routine is very important for health, vitality and concentration. It is worth investing in good sleep habits and creating the right sleep environment. It can be beneficial to keep the bedroom for sleep and rest, avoiding having screens on in the bedroom. Choosing a quiet room, using blackout blinds or curtains, asking cohabitants to be relatively quiet and silencing your mobile phone can limit external disturbances. Ear plugs and eye masks may be useful where this is not possible.

Being physically active during waking hours and having a regular bedtime can help with sleep patterns. However, it is best to avoid moderate or strenuous exercise, caffeine or other stimulants in the hours immediately before sleeping. Consider avoiding social media and news in this period. Having a wind down period in which you limit bright/blue light can help you settle. Many people find reading can be relaxing. A calming bath or shower can assist you to unwind before bed. If the nature of the shift work prevents you from getting a full night's sleep, napping may be a way of ensuring sufficient rest is achieved.

Alcohol, Sedatives, Stimulants

Caffeine can increase alertness for a short period of time but overuse can have negative physiological effects such as heart palpitations. Consumption of alcohol and the use of some medications that may cause drowsiness, such as sleeping tablets, should be avoided before and during a work shift. In general, alcohol can have a negative impact on duration and quality of sleep.

Avoid consumption of anything that affects your ability to concentrate, focus, recall or retain information. Misuse of substances is a health and safety hazard for both yourself and others, affecting your ability to take in information and to make rational decisions. Excessive use of alcohol and stimulants can lead to addiction and to mental and physical health problems.

Relationships and Social Life

Healthy and close relationships are very important for good mental health. If shift work makes your routine markedly different from those of your family and friends it is possible to become isolated, particularly during the current pandemic. Having good and regular communication with those close to you can be very beneficial. It can be informative and helpful to tell family and friends what your rostered hours are and, the impact the schedule has on you. It is important to schedule some time to stay in touch with family and friends. Some social interaction with colleagues that respect social distancing requirements may be possible, particularly if they are scheduled to work on the same shifts.

Know Your Supports

We can all benefit from a little support sometimes so it is important to remember where to find it. Your supports include:

- Colleagues
- Line Managers

- HR
- Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS)
- Trade Union
- Partner/spouse
- Family
- Friends
- GP

Conclusion

There are positive aspects to shift work. However, there can also be challenges, particularly antisocial hours, sleep difficulties and health risks. In being proactive in your self-care you can mitigate the challenging aspects and perform to your potential in the workplace while maximising your enjoyment of life in your personal time. There are steps that you can take in the areas of nutrition, exercise, sleep, relationships, behaviour and preparation for shifts which can enable you to thrive while shift working. When you are in need of a little extra support, there are a range of resources available to help including the Civil Service Employee Assistance Service (CSEAS).

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