



Shift work: getting enough sleep and exercise

About 25 per cent of workers in Canada work rotational shifts. One of the ongoing challenges of shift work is making sure that workers have the balance, energy and strength to perform their work safely. Shift workers often work irregular hours, rotating between day and night shifts and, in some cases, they work 12-hour shifts rather than eight-hour days.

There are benefits to shift work, of course—many enjoy it because it allows them longer periods of time off to be with their families or pursue other interests. But it can also be challenging as many shift workers perform critical duties in health care, police work, emergency response and the oil and gas industry, among others.

Finding work-life balance while working this kind of schedule can be a struggle—and failing to do so can put shift workers at heightened risk of injury and illness.

Sleep struggles

Most shift workers don't get enough sleep. They're often working while others sleep and sleeping when others are awake. This cycle runs contrary to the body's natural 24-hour rhythm, which governs how alert and awake we are at various times of the day.

One of the consequences of inadequate sleep is reduced cognitive functioning. You think and react slowly, which increases the likelihood of errors and negatively impacts both your memory and ability to think clearly.

Addressing this is essential for the health and well-being of shift workers. Fortunately, the National Sleep Foundation has several tips to do just that—here are some of their suggestions for both sleeping better and staying alert on the job:

- Try to exercise during breaks.
- Talk with co-workers while you work.
- Try to work with a buddy if you're on a night shift.
- Take short breaks throughout your shift to use the employee lounge, take a walk outside or climb stairs.
- Try to eat three normal meals per day. Eat healthy snacks and avoid foods that may upset your stomach.
- If you consume caffeine, do so early in your shift—before 3 a.m. if you are working a night shift.

- Don't leave the most tedious tasks to the end of your shift when you will likely feel most fatigued.
- Exchange ideas with your colleagues on how to cope with the problems of shift work.
- Avoid exercising before going to bed. Exercise raises your energy levels and body temperature. Ideally, you should exercise at least three hours before attempting to sleep.

Enough exercise?

If you do shift work, maintaining a schedule for regular exercise can be difficult but it can also be an enormous help. Physical activity increases both your energy and alertness. Even if exercising may seem difficult, try and find time to stay physically active—you'll be glad you did.

If you're struggling to maintain a regular exercise routine, find a co-worker—or group of co-workers—who's willing to exercise with you. Having even one other person to help hold you accountable can make it that much easier to go for a walk on your break instead of heading for the cafeteria.

Many companies offer incentives for employees to be active. For example, they may provide on-site workout equipment or offer support—through rebates, financial assistance or health spending accounts—for fitness memberships, pool passes and other physical activities.

What are some good ways to make exercise a regular part of your day?

- Register at a fitness centre, many of which are open 24/7 in larger cities.
- Participate in recreational sports, which can be a fun way to get regular exercise.
- Finding a convenient location for being active on the way to or from your work can make establishing a routine easier—some people exercise before work as a way to energize themselves for the day.
- A brisk, 30-minute walk outdoors each day is often enough to experience immediate health benefits.
- Research has shown that wearing a pedometer is a good reminder to be active and that people who use them are generally more active than non-users.

The critical part is finding something that you enjoy and making it as accessible as possible. Doing so makes it easier to establish lasting habits.

With a few of these tips and strategies in place, shift workers can sleep better, exercise more regularly and experience both the physical and mental benefits of a healthier lifestyle. With a bit of creativity and determination, it's possible to find a healthy work-life balance—even if shift work makes it difficult to do so.

Learn more

[Physical Activity @ Work](#)

The Physical Activity @ Work web site provides information to support work-life balance in your workplace.

[Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety](#)

The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety web site is a good source of information and practical advice for shift workers and their employers.

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