



SHIFTWORK STRATEGIES



Shiftwork is more than just a work schedule. It's a way of life. When work schedules change, entire lives change. Shiftwork requires biological adjustments, such as sleeping and eating at odd hours. It can have a big impact on family and social life because work cuts into time normally spent with family and friends. Shiftwork often means missing out on a school play, a party or a quiet evening at home with your spouse.

Yet shiftwork professionals are vital components of a society where 24-hour operation is required for many industries and services, including medical care, fire and police protection, electricity and transportation. More than 25% of the workforce operates on a shiftwork basis. In fact, one in four working men and one in six working women are currently on some type of variable or round-the-clock schedule.

The Liabilities of Shiftwork

When people begin working shifts, they often don't give much thought to what their work schedules will be like or realize how these schedules will affect every aspect of their lives. Yet most people who work shifts have a hard time making the biological and social adjustments required by their work.

According to studies, night-shift workers are 60 to 80% more likely to experience serious sleep disorders than day-shift workers. They also have a higher divorce rate and are more likely to experience mood swings and depressions. They suffer more gastrointestinal problems and abuse drugs and alcohol to a greater extent. They get less satisfaction out of their jobs and are more likely to retire early for health reasons.

Adjusting to Shiftwork

Fortunately, you can make a comfortable adjustment to shiftwork if, when assigned the night shift, you don't try to lead a "normal" life during the day and then work all night too. You should also avoid

adopting one lifestyle for workdays and another lifestyle for days off. The key is consistency.

No matter what shift you work, establish a routine, especially before bedtime. Most people feel keyed up after work and need to wind down before trying to sleep. Do something you find relaxing until you feel tired enough to sleep. Following are things to avoid if you want to sleep well:

- Avoid caffeinated beverages and food—including coffee, tea, chocolate and many soft drinks. Caffeine can remain eight hours in the body. Sleep attempted after consuming caffeine will be light.
- Refrain from consuming alcohol before bedtime. Alcohol may help you fall asleep faster, but it disturbs sleep and may also cause you to get up frequently to use the bathroom.
- Do not use sleeping pills. Sleep induced by pills is abnormal, and when used night after night, sleeping pills can become addictive.
- Consider the effects of nicotine. Like caffeine, nicotine is a stimulant

and can prevent you from falling asleep. Because nicotine is addictive, your body starts to experience withdrawal symptoms after several hours without it, which can make sleep more difficult.

Establish a Normal Meal Schedule

Shiftworkers are highly susceptible to digestive problems as a result of irregular eating habits. Gaining weight can also be a problem because night-shift workers may eat regular daytime meals, yet continue to snack through the night for energy.

Start your workday with high protein and gradually shift to carbohydrates as bedtime approaches. Since protein is hard to digest, meals high in protein or fat eaten within a few hours of bedtime can interfere with sleep.

Communicate With Your Friends and Family

Perhaps the biggest difficulty imposed by shiftwork is its strain on relationships. It's difficult to fulfill the role of parent or spouse when your schedule doesn't match those of the rest of your family.

Keep in mind that your work schedule is really your whole family's "life schedule." Talk about what's important to all of you and let your friends and family know how much you need their support. Try to plan one meal a day with your family so that you can count on that one special time together no matter what your work schedule. 