

Health and Safety Implications of Shiftwork

According to recent data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately 15 million people in the United States work on a rotating shift, night shift, or evening shift schedule. In addition, the total number of hours worked by employees in the United States is higher than most of Western Europe and Japan. Both working irregular shifts and working long hours have been shown to contribute to safety risks and health problems.

Shift workers tend to be more tired than the general population, which can lead to difficulty concentrating and slower reflexes. As a result, shift workers are more likely to make errors on the job or be involved in accidents. The stress of shiftwork may also cause such employees to acquire certain health conditions.

When an individual works at night, he or she is unable to get enough restorative sleep. Sleep following a night shift is usually shorter and less regenerative than sleep during the night would have been. During nighttime hours, body functions and brain activity slow down. Because the individual is already lacking sleep, he or she is likely to exhibit performance problems. Individuals who work rotating schedules will experience additional problems each time they must switch between day and night shifts.

In addition to fatigue and concentration problems, shiftwork can also lead to serious health problems. Research has shown that employees who work rotating



shift schedules are more likely to experience digestive problems, such as nausea, constipation, and stomach ulcers. Heart conditions are also more common among shift workers than in the general population.

Because shiftwork is often unavoidable, it is important to design the work schedule so that it minimizes the stress of shiftwork as much as possible. A properly designed work schedule can prevent accidents, improve worker morale, and decrease the likelihood of employee health problems.

All workers have a natural circadian rhythm that tells their bodies when to sleep and be awake. For this

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reason, employees who must be at work during late night and early morning hours are likely to have more trouble focusing. Certain shift times may also prevent workers from seeing family and friends. To prevent problems that may result from unusual shift times, many employers avoid scheduling the same worker for late night or early morning shifts during all work periods.

Though it may seem like it would be easier for workers to adapt to an unusual shift if it were a permanent assignment, most workers readjust to a normal schedule on their days off. For this reason, the majority of employers assign shiftwork on a rotating schedule. Rotating schedules prevent a worker from constantly experiencing the stress associated with the night shift. However, rotating schedules require workers to make changes to readjust to new sleep patterns regularly. To prevent serious health problems, it is advisable to rotate a worker's shift every few weeks, rather than weekly or after only a few days.



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Another important factor to consider in shiftwork is the amount of time an employee has to rest. Employees who work eight-hour shifts have more hours in the day remaining for rest than employees who work 12-hour shifts. Unfortunately, the other tasks employees must perform after their shift will not decrease when they work overtime, so employees who work long shifts must often sacrifice sleep in order to make ends meet.

To prevent a buildup of fatigue, employers of employees who must work long hours should avoid scheduling too many consecutive workdays for the same employee.

Employers who require workers to perform shiftwork should also teach employees effective coping skills to deal with the stress of the schedule. Employees working rotating shifts can improve their situations by getting as much sleep as possible during their time off. They should also make an effort to spend time with family and friends, exercise, and eat a balanced diet.



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