

Getting Adequate Sleep

If you are one of the millions of workers in Canada who work at times other than the normal daytime hours between 7:00 AM and 6:00 PM then you know first-hand the challenge of fighting the body's natural wake-sleep pattern, and the strain shift work can put on your health, well-being, family, and social life.

If you work a compressed work week, shifts that rotate, shifts that are split apart by several hours, or permanent afternoon, evening, or night shifts then you will know first-hand how challenging it can be to get enough sleep, ensure a consistent sleep schedule, and be able to remain alert and productive while at work. Here are some tips to help you out based on the latest research in this area:

Get quality sleep

In addition to making your bedroom as dark as possible and as quiet as possible, ensure the room temperature is comfortable as your sleep pattern is very sensitive to temperature. This is especially true during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, the stage when you dream. REM sleep is reduced if you are either too warm or too cool.

Best sleep times for night shifts

The latest studies show that taking a nap just before starting the night shift really helps staying alert at night. For example, if you start work at 7 PM you could eat dinner early, say 4:30 PM, and then nap from 5 to 6 PM until it is time to leave for work. It is best to get to sleep soon after returning home from the night shift. Having a light snack and shower followed by a short period of relaxation is useful, but delaying sleep for too long, although it may make you sleepier, will reduce your total sleep time.

On the day following your last night shift, try this—sleep for no more than four or five hours when you get home from work and avoid napping later that day. This reduced amount of sleep will be enough to get you through the day, and make it easier to fall asleep at a reasonable hour in the evening.

Recharge with bright light

To prevent drifting of the clock you need to see bright light each morning. Artificial light sources may be helpful. To be effective, the light must be very bright, at least 5,000 lux (which is 10 times brighter than a typical well-lit room) and can be purchased at specialty health stores.

Eat a healthy diet

A healthy, balanced diet helps buffer your body against dramatic swings in chemical and physiological changes which can help keep your moods even and your sleep more satisfying. Experts recommend you eat a high protein meal prior to work, a mixed protein and carbohydrate meal for your "midnight lunch" and a light carbohydrate meal before you go to sleep.

Be kind to your stomach

Digestion is less efficient and slower at night than in the day time and the stomach is less well protected from the effects of acidic, spicy, or fatty foods. Be kind to your stomach when eating at night or you may experience indigestion and heartburn. Try to eat small frequent meals and avoid high fat food and sugary snacks at night.

Keep physically active

The value of physical fitness cannot be overstated. In addition to waking you up, regular physical activity enhances cardiovascular fitness and muscle tone, improves the ability to tolerate stress and combat fatigue, and improves sleep. Studies have shown that the more physically fit you are, the easier it is to adapt to shift work.

Stay alert with caffeine

Caffeine is a stimulant and can improve alertness and performance at night. The effects of caffeine typically begin 30 minutes after consumption, peak at about two hours, and last for about five hours. Caffeine activates the arousal centers in the brain, raises body temperature, and inhibits the secretion of melatonin, which is a sleep-promoting hormone. It is important to restrict your caffeine intake to the first half of the night so it will not disrupt your daytime sleep.

Look after yourself as you age

Studies show that shift work becomes less tolerable beyond the age of 40. That means, the older you are, the more you need to do to look after yourself if you continue to work shifts.

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