

Talking about shift workers by Mike Ely

Before you begin

Review the answers to these questions:

- Does your company have shift work?
- Take a look at your OSHA 300 and first-aid logs. Do you have more injuries during the second and third shift?
- Is your production and quality control lower during the second and third shift?
- Have any of your employees had automobile accidents driving to or from work on the second or third shift?
- How does the company deal with shift work and managing workers on second and third shift?



Introduction

America is a 24-hour a day, seven-day a week society. This results in many workers working shifts other than the normal hours of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. This leads to problems with worker safety and health in the short and long term.

However, you can reduce the impact of working shift work. You can take the measures you need to improve worker performance and safety. The trick is to understand what to do and have a plan to successfully deal with the stress of shift work.

Discussion

We live in a society where we work 365 days a year. To meet the demands of modern life, more than 15 million Americans work a night shift at some time during the year. It is very difficult to adjust to working nights or rotating shifts, and it causes problems for the worker.

Our bodies adjust to a circadian rhythm. This is a major body rhythm with regular ups and downs during the 24-hour day. Most people feel most active and alert at about 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. when the body's ability to produce energy from food is at its highest. They feel sleepiest at 4 a.m. to 6 a.m. when the body is producing its lowest levels of energy.

There are different types of people. For example, some are morning people and some are night people. But for the majority, the day-work and night-sleep situation is best for performance and safety.

Health effects

The shift worker is trying to sleep when his or her body tells the worker that he or she should be awake and working. This leads to poor sleep, fatigue and possible long term health effects for the worker.

Worker fatigue shows up as a causative factor in many serious incidents. For example, the BP refinery explosion in Texas City, Texas, killed 15 persons and injured another 180. In addition, many interstate trucking accidents frequently result from driver fatigue. Numerous studies show shift work causes medical conditions such as digestive conditions, an increased incidence of heart disease as well as certain cancers.

It is true that shift work impacts workers' safety. Second-shift workers are 15.2 percent more likely to be injured than first-shift employees. Third-shift workers are 28 percent more likely to be injured. Studies show an increased risk at night when the circadian rhythm is low and fatigue builds up.

Reducing risk

What can you do to reduce the shift worker's risk? You cannot change the circadian rhythm, but you can address worker fatigue and reduce it. First, you can get enough good sleep. It is hard to sleep during the daytime when

the rest of the world is active, and your body is telling you to be active. Most workers need a minimum of at least six hours of deep sleep, but most need more sleep than that.

Here are techniques to help ensure you get the good sleep you need to avoid fatigue at work.

Bedtime rituals

- Take a warm bath or soak in a hot tub.
- Lower the room temperature because a cool environment improves sleep.
- Do not activate the brain by balancing a checkbook, reading a thriller or doing other stressful activities.

Light

- Darken the bedroom and bathroom.
- Install light blocking and sound-absorbing curtains or shades in the bedroom.
- Wear eyeshades.

Sound

- Wear earplugs.
- Use a white-noise machine to block other noises. An example is a fan.
- To absorb the sound, install carpeting and drapes.
- Unplug the telephone.

Food

- Avoid caffeine less than five hours before your bedtime.
- Do not stop for a drink after work. Although it may bring the feeling of relaxation, alcohol disturbs sleep.
- Eat a light snack, and avoid too much sugar or fats before bedtime. Do not go to bed too full or too hungry.

Exercise

- If you exercise at work or at home, do it at least three hours before you go to bed. Otherwise, exercise after you sleep. Because exercise is alerting and raises the body's temperature, it should not be done too close to your bedtime.

Driving danger

Another concern is the worker returning home after his or her shift ends. For workers that are already fatigued from poor sleep and a long shift, the drive home is dangerous. A moment of inattention can lead to disastrous results. Here are ideas to help you avoid the danger of driving when you are tired.

- If possible, carpool. Have the most alert person do the driving.
- Drive defensively.
- Do not stop off for a night cap.
- When you are sleepy, stop to nap. But, do it in a locked vehicle that is in a well-lit area.
- When you can, take public transportation.

Ask the group

- Make a list of what helps you sleep and when you sleep best.
- What foods and beverages do you avoid before going to sleep?
- If the worker has a family, how do family members deal with the worker's need to sleep during their active time?

Group action

- Talk about methods to deal with fatigue and problems arising from shift work.
- To reduce shift-work stressors, develop strategies to deal with scheduling and work assignments. Understand methods to get more restful and productive sleep when your body says you should be awake.

Summary

Shift work can be disruptive to our bodies and our personal lives. Working nights puts you in a situation where you are active when your family and friends are asleep, and you need to sleep when they are active. Careful planning helps you maintain as normal a life as possible while ensuring you get the good quality sleep you need to avoid fatigue.

References

Work Schedules: Shift Work and Long Work Hours (NIOSH): <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/workschedules/>

Plain Language About Shiftwork (NIOSH): <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/pdfs/97-145.pdf>

Shift Work: Reducing the Adverse Impact of Working the Night Shift (California OSHA): <http://www.ca-safety.com/public/1432.cfm>

Shift Workers (Texas): <http://www.tdi.state.tx.us/pubs/vid-eoresource/stpshiftworkers.pdf>

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