

COPING WITH SHIFT WORK

*Shift work can make it difficult
to get sufficient sleep and
stay alert on the job.*



AASM
American Academy of
SLEEP MEDICINE™

More than 15 million Americans are like you-- working evening, rotating, or on-call shifts, and facing sleep-related problems as a result.

Sleep helps your brain and body work properly. When you don't get enough sleep, your memory, mental ability, motor skills, job performance, and moods may be affected. What's more, the likelihood of on-the-job errors and accidents increases. Long-term health risks of not getting enough sleep include: frequent infections (such as the common cold or the flu), high cholesterol levels, heart disease, obesity, even certain types of cancer.

Circadian rhythms and shift work

Shift work can be challenging to your health and lifestyle because your body is sensitive to changes in *circadian rhythms*. The circadian rhythms are roughly 24-hour cycles that tell your body when to sleep and wake. This influences your body temperature and levels of alertness, as well as sleepiness, hunger, and hormones changes.

In healthy adults, sleepiness tends to occur during a specific phase of circadian rhythms, with the strongest sleep urge occurring between 2:00 A.M. and 5:00 A.M.

If you work at night or on a rotating schedule, you must fight your body's natural circadian rhythm by staying awake when your brain is programmed to be sleepy and by trying to sleep when your brain is programmed to be awake. As a result, many shift workers tend to be continually sleep deprived. If you work at night and sleep during the day, you may sleep up to four hours less than those who work during the day and sleep at night. It may be challenging for you to fall asleep, and once you do, your sleep may be light, interrupted, and less likely to make you feel well rested.

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How do I get more and better sleep?

There are several therapies that may help make shift work easier for you to manage. The approach that is best for you will depend on your individual needs and circumstances. A board-certified sleep medicine physician at an American Academy of Sleep Medicine accredited sleep facility can provide you with a specific strategy to help your body adjust to your work schedule and to improve your sleep.

Bright Light Therapy: Exposure to a special artificial light may actually shift your circadian rhythm, so you are able to sleep during the day and be alert on the job at night. Bright-light boxes, desk lamps, dawn simulators, and other products are available from several manufacturers. A board-certified sleep medicine physician can help determine the right amount of light exposure and will discuss the proper time to use these devices. It is recommended that you not purchase these devices on your own, however, because bright light exposure at the wrong time can actually make things worse.

Sleep Medications: Your doctor can prescribe a sleeping pill to help you get rest at the proper time. Sleeping pills may help you sleep better in the short term, but in the long term it is usually not the best option. Many people also experience side effects when on sleep medications. Additionally, research shows that your alertness and performance on your next night shift will only partially improve if you have used sleeping pills to sleep during the day. Although sleeping pills may offer relief and may be appropriate along with other treatment, they do not address the actual cause of your sleep problems. Sleeping pills cannot reset your internal clock.

If you think sleeping pills could occasionally help you, talk with a board-certified sleep medicine physician.

Over-the-counter sleep aids are not the best choice to help you sleep since many of them cause drowsiness for several hours after you awaken, which can be unsafe.



Melatonin: Melatonin supplements may help you adapt better to a shift work schedule. Melatonin is a natural hormone produced by the brain and considered a signal for when your body is supposed to sleep. Research suggests that a dose of 0.5 mg is just as effective at higher doses. Take melatonin several hours before you plan to sleep.

Caffeine: Moderate amounts of caffeine can help you stay alert on the job. Stop using caffeine in the later portions of your shift, so that it does not disrupt your sleep when it is time to go to bed. If you feel that you are using more and more caffeine to remain alert during your waking hours, discuss this with your doctor.

Alcohol: Alcohol is NOT beneficial to sleep, and may make it harder to stay asleep. Even though alcohol may make you feel tired, when the alcohol is metabolized by your body your sleep will actually be less restful. Over time, alcohol can severely fragment your sleep.

Tips for Managing Shift Work

- » If possible, take a nap during a break in your shift or before reporting for a night shift. A nap of just 20-30 minutes can improve your alertness on the job.
- » Minimize changes to your work schedule. If you must work rotating shifts, ask your manager to schedule a clockwise rotation. This means your new shift will start later than your last shift. It is easier to stay up late than to go to bed early.
- » If you always work the same shift, try to keep the same schedule on work days and off days. Keeping a routine helps your body know when to be alert and when to sleep.
- » To help you stay alert, your workplace should be well-lit and cool rather than warm.
- » Plan ahead for a change in a shift work schedule. Begin to alter your sleep time a few days in advance. This will make it easier for your body to adjust. *See the example below.*

Schedule	Sleep Time
Evening Shift (5pm – 1am)	3am – 11am
Night 1 of Transition	5am - 1pm
Night 2 of Transition	7am – 3pm
Night 3 of Transition	8am – 4pm
Night Shift (11pm – 7am)	9am – 5pm

Tips for Better Sleep Follow these tips to get the best sleep possible.

- » Night shift workers can wear sunglasses on the trip home in order to minimize the effect of sunlight on their body clocks.
- » Buy dark curtains for the bedroom windows or wear an eye mask for sleep.
- » Use a fan, white noise machine, or white noise smartphone application to block out other noises.
- » Turn off your phone ringer, disconnect the doorbell or put up a “Do Not Disturb” sign.
- » Make sure others in your home are aware of your work schedule. They should keep the home quiet when they know that you need to sleep.
- » Establish relaxing bedtime rituals, such as a warm bath, light and healthy bedtime snack, or 10 minutes of reading.
- » Use your bed only for sleep and sex.
- » Eat meals that are high in protein and carbohydrates and avoid fried food, going to bed when hungry, and going to bed immediately after eating a large meal.
- » Exercise regularly and maintain a healthy diet.
- » Avoid consuming alcohol and smoking close to bedtime.
- » Turn off any electronics at least one hour before bed.

If you have difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep after your shift work, if you feel tired even after sleeping 7-8 hours, or if you feel that shift work is impacting your physical or mental health, see a board-certified sleep medicine physician at an American Academy of Sleep Medicine accredited sleep facility to discuss your sleep patterns and work schedule, as well as discuss other sleep disorders that may be causing you problems.

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