

Night Shifts and Fatigue

Coping skills for the working nurse.

? As a new nurse I'm excited about my job in acute care, but I'm concerned about working the night shift. I have young children to take care of. What can I do to ward off fatigue?

A large number of studies have examined the effects of night-shift work on the health and safety of health care workers, as well as the effects of various interventions on fatigue. Researchers have found many potentially negative aspects of night-shift work, but some workers also experience benefits such as incentive pay and reduced volume of activities and personnel and choose to work these shifts.

As you begin this work, be aware of potential risks so that you can take measures to prevent them or recognize them if they occur. Researchers have theorized that these risks stem from disturbances to sleep, circadian rhythms, and social life caused by having to sleep during the day. You can use suggestions from the literature to reduce these disturbances and risks. See the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Web site for more information: www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/workschedules.

The literature associates shift

work with work-time sleepiness and fatigue, reduced alertness, short-term memory problems, poorer reaction times, reduced performance, accidents, and errors. Studies also report increased rates of actual or near-miss car crashes in nurses when driving home after working a night shift. In addition, many of these nurses reported that changing from night work to day activities was fatiguing and affected their performance.

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Researchers caution that shift work could exacerbate chronic disorders such as sleep disorders, gastrointestinal problems, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, asthma, psychiatric illness, substance abuse, epilepsy, and others. Some studies report possible links with breast cancer and adverse reproductive health as well as difficulties with mood and interpersonal relationships.

Individual nurses can adopt strategies in coping with the night shift. Most researchers begin with one important suggestion: get enough sleep to feel rested and restored. The following are specific steps to help you sleep well during the day:

- Install opaque coverings over windows and under doorways to prevent light from entering the bedroom.

- Turn off the phone and use a white-noise machine or ear plugs to minimize disturbance from noise. Instruct family and friends when not to awaken you.
- Keep the bedroom cool, and use the right amount of covers to feel comfortable.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and heavy or spicy foods for several hours before you plan to sleep.
- Stay away from bright light for several hours before bedtime. Wear wrap-around sunglasses for the morning commute home, and dim lighting at home before going to sleep.
- Shore up your social support. Get assistance for childcare while you are sleeping. Also, tell your friends and family about your special needs so that they can plan social events at times that will work for you.

Night-shift work may be a permanent and necessary aspect of nursing, and research indicates that interventions to improve coping with these shifts are needed for individual nurses, their employers, and the nursing profession as a whole. Studies report that certain conditions, such as extended shifts and mandatory overtime, compound the difficulties of working these shifts and should be addressed by employers and the profession. See the original research article "How Long and How Much Are Nurses Now Working?" (AJN, April 2006).

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