CDC Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Coronavirus Disease 2019

What Workers and Employers Can Do to Manage Workplace Fatigue during COVID-19

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has touched all aspects of society including how we work. Emergency responders, health care workers, and others providing essential services to the community have been especially stretched thin, working longer hours than usual, working more shifts or even over-night, and leaving less time to sleep and recharge.

Under regular circumstances, adults need 7–9 hours of sleep per night, along with opportunities for rest while awake, optimal health, and well-being. Long work hours and shift work, combined with stressful or physically demanding work, can lead to poor sleep and extreme fatigue. Fatigue increases the risk for injury and deteriorating health (infections, illnesses, and mental health disorders).

While there is no one solution to fit everyone's needs, here are some general strategies that workers and employers can use to manage workplace fatigue and work safely.

What can workers do when they feel too fatigued to work safely?

Recognize these are stressful and unusual circumstances and you may need more sleep or time to recover.

Tips to improve sleep:

- You'll sleep better if your room is comfortable, dark, cool, and quiet.
- If it takes you longer than 15 minutes to fall asleep, set aside some time before bedtime to do things to help you relax. Try meditating, relaxation breathing, and progressive muscle relaxation.
- Before you begin working a long stretch of shifts, try "banking your sleep" – sleeping several extra hours longer than you normally do.
- After you've worked a long stretch of shifts, remember it may take several days of extended sleep (for example, 10 hours in bed) before you begin to feel recovered. Give yourself time to recover.
- Avoid sunlight or bright lights 90 minutes before you go to sleep, when possible. Exposure to light just before bedtime can cause you to feel more awake.
  - If you work a night shift and drive home during sunlight hours, try wearing sunglasses to reduce your exposure to sunlight during your drive home.
  - Consider using blackout shades at home when sleeping.
- Take naps when you have the opportunity.
  - A 90-minute nap before working a night shift can help prevent you from feeling tired at work.
- Eat healthy foods and stay physically active because it can improve your sleep.
- Before you go to sleep, avoid foods and drinks that can make falling asleep more difficult:
  - Avoid alcohol, heavy meals, and nicotine for at least 2–3 hours before bedtime.
  - Don't drink caffeine within 5 hours of bedtime.

Know what to do if you feel too tired to work safely.

- Use a buddy system while you're at work. Check in with each other to ensure everyone is coping with work hours and demands.
- Watch yourself and your coworkers for signs of fatigue — like yawning, difficulty keeping your eyes open, and difficulty concentrating. When you see something, say something to your coworkers so you can prevent workplace

injuries and errors.

- Find out if your employer has a formal program to help you manage fatigue on the job. Read information about the program and ask questions so you fully understand your employer's policies and procedures for helping employees manage fatigue.
- Report any fatigue-related events or close-calls to a manager to help prevent injuries and errors.
- Do not work if your fatigue threatens the safety of yourself or others. Report to a manager when you feel too tired to work safely.

What steps should employers take to reduce workplace fatigue for workers?

- Recognize that these are stressful and unusual circumstances and risk for fatigue may be increased.
- Create a culture of safety with clear coordination and communication between management and workers. This can include establishing a Fatigue Risk Management Plan or strategies for fatigue mitigation on the job. Share and ensure that employees understand the processes.
- Spot the signs and symptoms of fatigue (e.g., yawning, difficulty keeping eyes open, inability to concentrate) in yourself and your employees and take steps to mitigate fatigue-related injury or error.
  - The Epworth Sleepiness Scale is a short survey that can be posted in a common area for workers to quickly rate their fatigue.
  - Create a procedure that does not punish workers for reporting when they, or their coworkers, are too fatigued to work safely. Build it into team comradery as an example of how management and staff can support each other.
  - Develop processes to relieve a worker from their duties if they are too fatigued to work safely.
    - If available, and agreeable with workers, consider assigning workers who are just starting their shifts onto safety-critical tasks.
    - If possible, rotate workers or groups of workers through tasks that are repetitive and/or strenuous. Tools or workstations that are unavoidably shared need to be properly cleaned and disinfected between usage.
    - If possible, schedule physically and mentally demanding workloads and monotonous work in shorter shifts and/or during day shifts.
- Provide information for workers on the consequences of sleep deprivation and resources to assist workers manage fatigue.
- Allow staff enough time to organize their off-duty obligations and get sufficient rest and recovery.
  - Schedule at least 11 hours off in-between shifts (each 24-hour period), and one full day of rest per seven days for adequate sleep and recovery.
  - Avoid penalizing those who may have restricted availability to work extra shifts/longer hours (e.g., caring for dependents).
- If rotating shift work is needed, use forward rotations (day to evening to night) and provide staff with sufficient notice when scheduling, particularly if there is a shift change.
- Avoid scheduling staff for more than 12 hours, if possible.
- Formalize and encourage regularly scheduled breaks in clean and safe areas where social distancing can be maintained. Recognize the need for additional time for increased hand hygiene and putting on and taking off required personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Provide alternative transportation to and from work and mandatory paid rest time prior to driving commutes after work, when possible.
  - Consider arranging for nearby offsite housing for those working extended shifts and at high risk for COVID-19, such as health care workers. Nearby housing will reduce travel times, allowing for more rest and recovery.

Where can I get more information?

Fatigue

Fatigue

- CDC Sleep and Sleep Disorders website: https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/index.html
- NIOSH Science Blog — Managing Fatigue During Times of Crisis: Guidance for Nurses, Managers and Other Health Care Workers: blogs.cdc.gov/niosh-science-blog/2020/04/02/fatigue-crisis-hcw/
- National Response Team Guidance for Managing Fatigue During Disaster Operations: www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/oilspillresponse/pdfs/NRT-Fatigue-for-Emergency-Workers.pdf
- National Sleep Foundation Guidelines During the COVID-19 Pandemic website: www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-guidelines-covid-19-isolation
- American Academy of Sleep Medicine: Sleep Education website: sleepeducation.org

COVID-19

- NIOSH Workplace Safety and Health Topic website: www.cdc.gov/niosh/emres/2019_ncov.html
- CDC COVID-19 website: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/
- CDCINFO: 1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636) | TTY: 1-888-232-6348 | website: www.cdc.gov/info

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