

Task Shift Worker Fatigue - From Working Patterns and Overtime



Fatigue refers to the issues that arise from excessive working time or poorly designed shift patterns or insufficient sleep.

Fatigue is a state of mental or physical weariness. It results in slower reactions, a reduced ability to process information, memory lapses, absent-minded slips, 'losing the picture' and lack of attention.

Fatigue can lead to errors and accidents, ill-health and injury, and reduced productivity. It is often a cause of incidents or accidents that involve significant loss or injury.

What can cause fatigue?

The main factors causing fatigue include:

- Loss of sleep;
 - o 'acute', for example, having 3 hours less sleep than normal; or
 - o 'cumulative' for example having 1 hour less sleep than normal over each of several days
 - o poor quality of sleep, irrespective of cause e.g. from frequent interruptions, illness or disorder such as sleep apnoea ¹.
- prolonged or intensive exertion;
- Poorly-designed shift patterns (length, rotation, start times);
- Excessive overtime;
- Environmental conditions such as excessive heat, humidity, noise;
- Inadequate rest breaks during work; and
- Insufficient food and water.

What are the main effects of fatigue?

Compared with their normal state, a fatigued person can:

- Find it hard to: concentrate, make clear decisions or take in and act on information;
- Have more frequent lapses of attention or memory;
- React more slowly (for example, to hazards arising in the workplace);
- Make more errors;
- Occasionally fall asleep at work, momentarily or for several minutes;
- Have less motivation or interest in their work; and
- Be irritable.

¹ **Sleep apnoea**; this is a specific sleep disorder characterized by pauses in breathing during sleep. Individuals with sleep apnoea are rarely aware of having difficulty breathing, even upon awakening and can become conditioned to the daytime sleepiness and fatigue associated with the resultant significant levels of sleep disturbance.

Learning more about shift workers' fatigue.**If the answer to any of the questions below is 'no', then you need to take action****Policy**

Is there a policy (agreement, framework, etc.) that specifically addresses shift patterns, working hours, overtime and guards against fatigue? ☐

- Does the policy demonstrate commitment to the management of this issue? ☐
- Have shift workers been involved in the development and review of the policy? ☐
- Is the input of associated health protection advisors such as health and safety teams, company doctor, worker safety or union representatives also collected and considered? ☐
- Does the policy state how risks arising from fatigue related to hours of work and shift work should be assessed and controlled? ☐
- Does the policy identify who it affects, and outline the responsibilities of management, supervisors and shift workers? ☐
- Does the policy outline the requirements for medical health checks for shift workers? ☐
- Is there a periodic review and update of the policy? ☐

Assessment

Has there been any consideration of hours of work and shift systems and their effect on shift workers? ☐

- Did this specifically assess the risk of fatigue in safety critical tasks and roles? ☐
- Is this risk assessment repeated or reviewed at specific intervals? ☐
- Does the shift pattern conform to good practice? ☐
- Have the underlying causes of fatigue been examined? ☐
- Is there an effective classification and recording system for working hours? ☐
- Are the causes of exceeding defined hours recorded, categorized and assessed? ☐
- Does the assessment show which measures are effective for managing fatigue and which are not? ☐
- Have shift workers, supervisors, managers and associated health protection advisors been consulted in finding ways of avoiding and managing fatigue? ☐

Control

Has the business set limits for the number of hours and the type of shift patterns for various groups (operators, drivers)? ☐

- What are the consequences if these limits are exceeded? ☐
- Are there arrangements for the maximum amount of agreed overtime? ☐
- Is any overtime spread equally over all workers and shifts (and how is this managed)? ☐
- Is shift swapping allowed and if so how is it monitored and controlled? ☐
- Are the consequences of shift workers taking second jobs when off-shift considered and monitored? ☐
- Has the opinion of the shift workers on the shift pattern been obtained? ☐

Monitoring

- Is there a system of recording working hours, overtime, and on-call working? ☐

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