



# Workplace Fatigue

## Nothing to Snooze About

Lack of sleep or prolonged physical or mental exertion can lead to fatigue. Fatigued workers are known to have reductions in reaction time and decision-making ability. They also have impaired judgment and increased risk-taking behavior. Studies have shown that 24 hours without sleep may impair neurobehavioral performance similar to having a 0.10% blood alcohol level, which is above the legal limit for operating a vehicle. Studies also show that missing just two hours of sleep per night over a week can lead to performance deficiencies that are equal to 24 hours of sleep deprivation.

A fatigued worker is a dangerous worker. Balance, coordination, motor skills and cognitive functioning and ability to pay attention to what they are doing are all impacted. Fatigue has been a factor in some of the biggest accidents in history, including the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Space Shuttle Challenger disaster, Chernobyl and Three Mile Island. Worker fatigue can negatively affect employers by lost productivity and increased healthcare and injury costs. Fatigue ultimately effects employees' health and their general wellbeing.

Staffing shortages are causing employees to sacrifice rest in order to work longer hours. Job demands are creating stress that leads to fewer hours of sleep. Luckily, there are steps that employees and business leaders can take to recognize and better manage fatigue in the workplace.

### Fatigue Risk Factors:

- Unrealistic time pressures and stress
- Lack of choice in the daily work routine
- Long commutes
- Irregular work hours – work hours change from day to day or shifts change from week to week
- Jobs that require sustained attention or that are physically or cognitively demanding
- Long workweeks of 50 or more hours
- Long shifts of 10 or more hours
- Quick shift returns
- High workload
- Lack of rest breaks
- Sleep deprivation
- Health factors such as sleep disorders or medications
- Diet and eating habits
- Environmental issues such as light and noise
- Working at night



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### Symptoms of Fatigue:

- Mentally or physically tired
- Irritability
- Reduced alertness, concentration and memory
- Reduced ability to be productive
- Lack of motivation
- Depression
- Boredom
- Headaches
- Loss of appetite
- Digestive problems



Image source: iStock.com

### What can Management do to Help Prevent Fatigue?

- Balance workloads, staffing, and shift schedules to minimize fatigue hazards.
- Schedule critical tasks at times of maximum alertness. Times of decreased alertness include the end of shifts, early afternoon, and early hours of the morning.
- Assess physical and mental job demands.
- Identify hazards and conduct a risk assessment for factors associated with fatigue.
- Treat fatigue as a form of impairment and manage the hazards accordingly.
- Educate employees to recognize the signs of fatigue, monitor themselves and coworkers, and take steps to reduce safety risks.
- Provide employee training and education about the importance of proper rest, the hazards of working while fatigued, and sleep practices.
- Develop and implement a response to when a person is experiencing fatigue.
- Design the work area to have appropriate lighting, temperature, and noise levels.
- Encourage workers to seek treatment for sleep disorders.
- Provide mental health services, including employee assistance programs (EAP).
- Include fatigue and causes of fatigue as a possible factor when investigating incidents.
- Discourage extended use of electronic devices. For example, change expectations about staff availability after working hours and limit after-hours communications.



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- Include “Worker Fatigue” in your rotation of safety talk topics.
- Provide variety in work activities, and encourage workers to take breaks to prevent and mitigate sleepiness.
- Encourage frequent breaks to maintain alertness.
- Provide lodging or areas to rest or sleep, where appropriate and necessary.

### What can Employees do to Help Prevent Fatigue?

- Avoid alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine, especially before bed.
- Exercise and stretch regularly.
- Try to go on walks during breaks.
- Increase interaction with friends and family.
- Sleep in a dark, quiet, and cool room.
- Set a sleep schedule for yourself and stick to it. Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day if possible.
- Eat at regular intervals and avoid eating anything close to bedtime.
- Consume a balanced diet of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, healthy fats and protein.
- Use your bed just for sleeping. For example, do not watch television, use your electronic devices, read, or do work in bed.
- Ask family members to be respectful if somebody is sleeping.
- Limit the use of electronic devices before bedtime.
- If you nap – make the break less than 30 minutes, or more than 90 minutes because of the brain activity that occurs at various phases of the sleep cycle. Awaking after 30 minutes and before 90 minutes can leave you groggy.
- Obtain medical care for sleep disorders.

### Resources Used:

- ACOEM Guidance Statement “Fatigue Risk Management in the Workplace”: <https://acoem.org/acoem/media/News-Library/Fatigue-Risk-Management-in-the-Workplace.pdf>
- CCHOS Fact Sheets for Fatigue: <https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/fatigue.html>
- Safety BLR