

Sleep Health: Five Habits for Shift Workers

Human bodies maintain homeostasis by following a circadian rhythm which is a 24-hour cycle of physical, mental and behavioral changes influenced by environmental factors. If the circadian rhythm were followed precisely, one would sleep from 10pm-6am.

Insufficient sleep is linked to obesity, heart disease and heart attacks. For shift workers, their schedules may not allow them to sleep during "traditional" sleeping hours. Because of this schedule, falling and staying asleep may prove to be challenging. It may also alter digestion and can contribute to mental illness such as depression.

Studies show that over two thirds of shift workers indicate difficulty sleeping or problems with sleepiness, which can decrease one's productivity and increase likelihood of accidents at work.

Here are five tips, adapted from [Virgin Pulse](#), to help all employees, shift workers in particular, get the sleep needed to be healthy, productive and safe:

1. **Establish Sleep Patterns:** Even though tempting to switch to different hours on days off, it is essential to keep the same sleep/wake hours ALL days of the week. If naps are taken, keep them short: 30 minutes, most.
2. **Pay Attention to Eating Habits:** Because digestion is slower when asleep, aim to avoid heavy meals, spicy foods, protein, alcohol and large amounts of liquid a few hours before sleep; caffeine and cigarettes, four to six hours. If hungry prior to sleep, a snack including dairy (if tolerated) and some carbohydrates may assist in helping to fall asleep. A snack might include: milk, nuts and seeds, eggs, yogurt or cheese.
3. **Create a Restful Sleeping Environment:** A comfortable, supportive mattress will allow for a better rest. Electronics such as cell phones and computers should be avoided due to the blue light emitted from them which decrease melatonin output, a necessary hormone to promote sleep. Other helpful factors include: sleep headphones or earplugs, room temperature set between 60-67 degrees Fahrenheit and blackout curtains for a dark room.
4. **Get Physical Activity:** Exercise helps to promote sleep. [Moderate-intense exercise](#) has been shown to help fall and stay asleep for people with insomnia. If shift work is physically demanding, a few gentle stretches prior to sleep may prove helpful.
5. **Calm the Mind:** If the mind is racing, sleep can become more difficult. Writing in a journal prior to sleeping may assist in falling asleep. Try writing out worries and stresses running through the mind and keep paper and pen next to the bed if thoughts are racing during sleep time; add them to the list and go back to sleep. Using a [mindfulness practice](#) before sleep can be another way to wind down at the end of a work shift.