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## Shift Work Can Be Bad for Employee Health

### *How nutrition can help shift workers battle health, productivity & weight*

By Andrea Holwegner BSc, RD

It is hard to manage health, productivity and weight management with today's demanding work and family life commitments, landscape of unhealthy convenience foods, and short window of time to fit in enough sleep and physical activity. Toss in the additional stressors of shift work, and the challenge can become even bigger.

### **Why should employers and HR managers be especially concerned about shift workers?**

Shift workers have been shown to have a higher risk of sleep loss, obesity, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes. Shift work has also been linked to more digestive issues (nausea, heartburn, constipation and diarrhea) depression, stress, and relationship issues. Shift workers are also more likely to struggle with drug and alcohol addictions and safety issues such as accidents and injury. They can also suffer with more fatigue, lower concentration, and reduced productivity.



According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics the most common shift work professions include:

- Production, transportation, and material moving (mechanics, repairers, construction workers, machine operators, truck drivers, assemblers, inspectors and equipment cleaners)
- Technical, sales and administration (salespersons, retail workers and administrative support)
- Managerial and professional (executives, computer scientists and teachers);
- Other services (healthcare support, food, cleaning, personal and private household)
- Protective services (emergency medical services workers, police and firefighters)
- Healthcare services (residents and on-call physicians and nurses).

These professions require added workplace wellness and safety support to improve employee health and safety and reduce company bottom line expenses.

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## How might shift work influence health, productivity and my weight?

The reason shift work may be bad for your health is twofold. It can firstly be related to the influence on our biology itself, and secondly related to changes in our lifestyle habits.

On a biologic level, shift work influences our circadian rhythm, which is the physical, mental and behavioral changes that take place in a 24-hour period which are tied to lightness and darkness. If you disrupt the circadian rhythm, it can disrupt our overall energy level, metabolism, digestion, cardiovascular system, hormones, and immunity.

Shift work typically negatively influences our lifestyle habits since habit formation is hard when your schedule constantly changes. It is also difficult to keep track of what and how much food is eaten with a fluctuating schedule. Shift work can also be isolating and a challenge to participate in social activities, family meals and scheduled physical activity.

## What are the top nutrition strategies that can help shift workers?

Examining nutrition is one of the most critical strategies that will influence the health, productivity and weight management of shift workers. Here are some top strategies to get started:

### 1. Plan an eating schedule for each of your shifts.

Plan to eat within one hour of waking and then schedule meals and snacks every 3-5 hours until you go to bed. This will mean that for most people they will eat between 3-6 times per day.

For example if your shift is 11pm to 7am and you wake up at 4pm, then your eating schedule may look something like this:

- By 5pm Wake-up Meal
- 8-10 pm Pre-shift Meal
- 12-2 am Work Snack
- 4-6 am Work Meal
- 7-8 am Bedtime Snack

### 2. Ensure meals have both carbohydrates AND protein

Carbohydrates provide the brain and muscles with energy while protein is key for satiety and fullness. Balance your meals with 3 things (grains/starches, veggies/fruits and a source of protein). Balance your snacks with at least 2 things (veggies/fruits/grains/starches and a source of protein)

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### 3. Curb caffeine in the middle of your shift.

Caffeine can stay in your system for as long as eight hours, so decrease coffee, tea and other caffeine sources from the middle of your shift onward.

### 4. Watch alcohol intake.

Despite alcohol initially making you sleepy, it can hinder entering into the deep restorative stages of sleep.

### 5. Avoid large meals late into your shift.

Taking in lots of food and fluid before bed can cause indigestion and make it difficult to fall asleep, as well as cause you to wake up to urinate frequently at night.

### 6. Don't go to bed starved.

If you are chronically dieting, carb deprived and simply not eating enough, your sleep will be disturbed. Seek help from a registered dietitian to create a food plan that achieves a good balance of nourishment for health and weight management.

## What are some other strategies that are useful to improve my ability to cope and achieve health if I am a shift worker?

**Talk to your doctor.** Ask your physician for a referral to a sleep medicine physician who can help you create a healthy plan for “sleep hygiene” or practical and medical solutions for getting enough sleep, falling asleep quickly and staying asleep.

**Get help for emotional health.** Give yourself enough time to truly unwind before bed. If you are struggling with depression or anxiety, it can be difficult to get enough quality or quantity of sleep. Work with a registered psychologist and your physician to process and strategize feeling better and getting the help you need.

**Assess when you exercise.** Research shows exercise before bed can make it difficult to fall asleep, so you may need to move physical activity to another time.

**Power down stimulating activities.** Turn off smartphones, computers and television at least 30 minutes before going to bed. Take the television out of your bedroom.

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*Andrea Holwegner, known as the Chocoholic Dietitian, is founder and president of Health Stand Nutrition Consulting Inc., a member of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers and a media expert for the Dietitians of Canada. For nutrition counselling information and to sign up for a free monthly newsletter loaded with nutrition tips, recipes and more visit [www.healthstandnutrition.com](http://www.healthstandnutrition.com). Twitter @chocoholicRD.*

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