

Tip Sheet:

# EXPERT SLEEP HELP FOR YOUR SHIFT WORKERS

**Many of us know insufficient sleep isn't a good thing.** It's linked to health problems like obesity, heart disease, heart attacks and diabetes. But knowing this doesn't always make it easier to get the right amount of sleep. And for shift workers with irregular schedules, falling and staying asleep can be even more challenging.

Nearly 20 percent of EU workers today work nights shifts. Many of the jobs that require shift workers to provide around-the-clock coverage are essential to the fabric of our society, such as health care providers, utility technicians, firefighters and so many more. It's crucial for employers to take care of their shift workers and help them get the rest they need so they can perform at their best.

## THE IMPACT OF SHIFT WORK ON EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

Our bodies function on [circadian rhythms](#), a daily cycle of physical, mental and behavioural changes that are influenced by natural and environmental factors. Shift workers work irregular hours outside the typical 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. workday, which can throw these rhythms off. This can impact many areas of one's health, including sleep cycles and digestion. In fact, [irregular sleep schedules](#) have been shown to increase the likelihood of higher cholesterol and body mass index, as well as symptoms of [bipolar disorder](#) and major depression.

[Studies](#) show more than two-thirds of shift workers have difficulty sleeping or problems with sleepiness, and productivity is shown to be lower outside of daylight hours. Shift workers are more prone to developing certain types of cancers and gastrointestinal disorders, as well as being at an increased risk of accidents when driving or operating machinery.

# HELP SHIFT WORKERS IMPROVE SLEEP

Many workplace [wellbeing programs](#) have resources available to help educate workers on the importance of sleep and offer tips and tools for better sleep. With the help of experts, educate and support your shift workers to ensure they're getting the sleep they need to stay healthy, productive and safe.

## 1. Establish sleep patterns.

It can be difficult for shift workers to stick to a sleep schedule when the best time to enjoy family and hobbies on days off is during the daytime. But by waking and sleeping at the same times — even on weekends or days off — shift workers can establish a regular sleep pattern. Whenever possible, naps should be scheduled and taken for the same length of time.

## 2. Build better eating habits.

Digestion slows when asleep, so shift workers should avoid spicy foods, heavy meals, high-fat foods, protein, too many liquids, [alcohol](#) and caffeine for four to six hours before sleep. A small snack may help with insomnia, but not all foods are good options. Good choices are dairy and carbohydrate-rich foods that contain tryptophan, a sleep-promoting amino acid, such as milk, nuts and seeds, bananas, honey, eggs, yoghurt and low-fat cheese. Cigarettes should also be avoided, as nicotine is a stimulant with similar effects to caffeine.

## 3. Set up restful sleep environments.

If a mattress produces aches and pains, or if it's more than seven years old, it needs to be replaced. Phones and computers should be avoided before bed, since the [blue light emitted](#) affects melatonin levels, resulting in trouble falling asleep and less REM sleep. Sleep headphones, which are specifically designed for comfort when lying down, can be worn to avoid noise distractions. The optimal [temperature](#) for sleep is around 18 degrees Celsius. And since shift workers are likely to be sleeping when it's light outside, blackout curtains should be installed since a [dark bedroom](#) is better for sleep.

## 4. Get some physical activity.

Being regularly active is an important aspect of improving sleep. Moderate-intensity aerobic exercise — like brisk walking — has been shown to help people with [chronic insomnia](#) fall asleep faster and stay asleep longer. For shift workers who work physically demanding jobs, light stretching or yoga can help both the mind and body relax after a tough shift.

## 5. Wind down the mind.

Many people struggle with worrying at bedtime. When a mind is racing, it can be hard to turn it off, which can make falling asleep difficult. [Journaling](#) about positive experiences before bed can reduce bedtime worry, improve sleep quality and increase sleep time. Incorporating time for a mindfulness practice in a bedtime routine can also help shift workers wind down at the end of a long night.

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