

August 2021

Keeping safe and healthy when working shifts

Shift work can expose workers to different health and safety risks, especially fatigue. This guidance supports shift workers to stay healthy and safe.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for workers who carry out shift work. In this document, 'you' refers to the worker.

Shift work is any type of work that requires you to be awake and working when you would normally be asleep. Shift work might involve:

- permanent, rotating, changeable, non-standard, irregular, or unpredictable work hours
- early starts
- late finishes
- night work.

Long hours that span the traditional workday can also be classed as shift work when they include early starts and/or late finishes that require you to be awake when you would normally be asleep.

What are the effects of shift work?

Shift work causes fatigue. Fatigue is a physiological state where someone is unable to mentally and physically function at their best. This is caused by four main things, as shown in Figure 1 overleaf:

- poorer mental and physical health
- lower level of functioning
- increased risk of incidents or injuries.

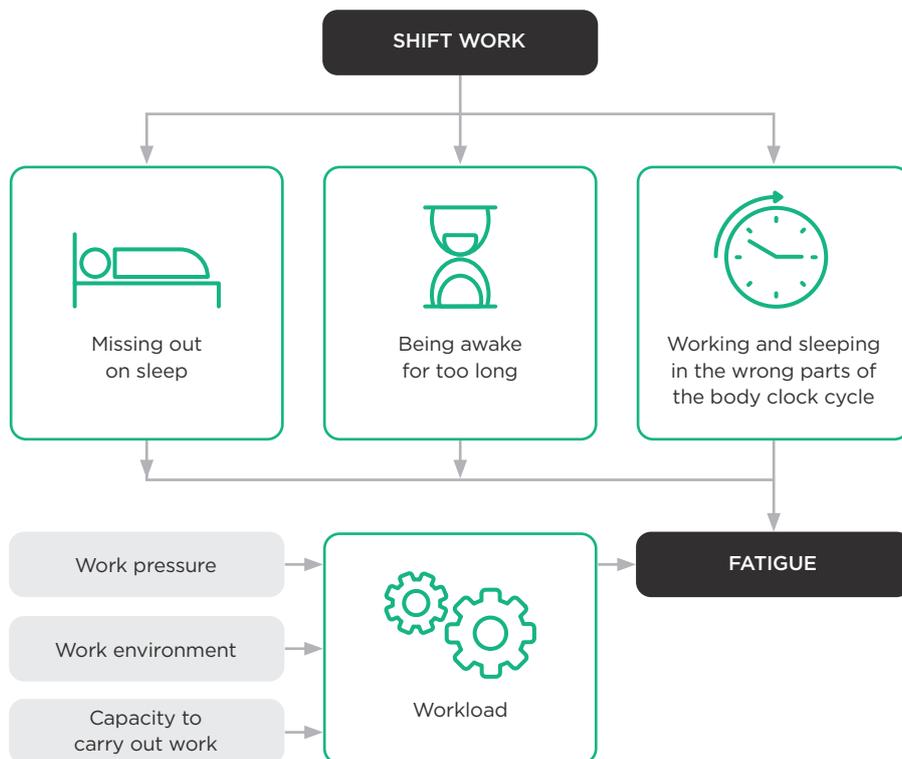


FIGURE 1:
Link between shift work and fatigue¹

What must PCBUs do?

Persons conducting a business or undertaking (PCBUs) have a duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act (2015) (HSWA) to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety of its workers, and any other workers who are influenced or directed by the business.

Your PCBU must manage risks to your health and safety. If you are at risk from fatigue resulting from shift work, control measures should be in place to eliminate or minimise the risks.

Workers also have a duty to take reasonable care of their own health and safety. This means that both you and the PCBU should work together to deal with the risks of shift work, including mental and physical fatigue. Shift work causes fatigue, but fatigue can also arise from non-work activities such as sports and family commitments.

Your PCBU must engage with you and your representatives when identifying and assessing risks from shift work, and when making decisions about the ways to eliminate or minimise those risks.

You have the right to health and safety representation, and your PCBU must engage with you in good faith.

For more information, see our guidance: [Good practice for worker engagement, participation, and representation](#)

¹ Sleep/Wake Research Centre, School of Health Sciences, College of Health, Massey University.

What you can do: Away from work

Good sleep practices

When your usual sleep patterns are disrupted by shift work, you can become fatigued.

You should:

- sleep for between 7-9 hours every 24 hours. This sleep may be taken in chunks
- create a good sleeping environment by removing distractions, keeping the sleep room cool and dark, and establishing your own pre-sleep routine. This is often referred to as improving your sleep hygiene
- discuss your need for enough good quality sleep with those you live with
- talk to your manager early on if your work roster is not working for you (for example, if you are feeling fatigued, or are struggling to cope physically or mentally with the shift work)
- talk to your doctor if you are having trouble adapting your sleep to the shift work - they may be able to provide ideas and advice to help you sleep.

Rest days

You should:

- use time away from work to recover from the effects of fatigue and shift work
- allow your brain and body to physically and mentally recover from the shift work
- fully disengage from work activity on days off. For example, do not look at work emails or take work phone calls on your rest days
- consider how you may be building up fatigue from external sources, such as family commitments, sport, and other activities. Fatigue is not just caused by work, so take other factors into account when planning how you will spend rest days.

For more information about rest breaks, see [Employment New Zealand](#)

What you can do: At work

Worker engagement around shift work and fatigue

Having proactive conversations, as well as reporting harm from shift work, is important.

The people who design work and shift rosters need to have accurate information to make effective changes.

You should:

- hold proactive conversations about shift work and fatigue with your colleagues and your manager
- reach out to your HSR, supervisor, or manager with your ideas on how to improve fatigue management, including training, policy, or procedure updates
- report concerns, near-misses, and incidents as soon as possible after they occur
- familiarise yourself with the policies and procedures that are in place at your work regarding fatigue
- participate and engage in training offered to you on dealing with fatigue in your role. If you feel you need/want additional training, talk to your manager or supervisor
- reach out to your supervisor or manager, a trusted colleague, a union delegate, or HSR if you think you are suffering from fatigue.

Napping at work

Napping at work (planned naps in a safe location) can be an effective way to temporarily reduce the effects of fatigue, including before driving home from work. Follow the policies and procedures set by the PCBU around napping if they have them in place.

However, do not regularly use napping to extend your shift.

For more information about planned napping at work, see our guidance: [Managing the risks of shift work](#)

Rest breaks during your shift

Frequent short breaks can reduce fatigue, improve productivity, and may reduce the likelihood of mistakes and incidents. If you have the opportunity:

- take all your breaks during your shift to minimise fatigue
- take breaks in a location where you can safely disengage from work
- use breaks wisely to refresh yourself in whatever way works best for you.

Where can you find more information?

For more information on any aspect of managing the risks of shift work, including information about sleep, the broader risks of shift work, and lifestyle factors, see our good practice guidelines for PCBUs: [Managing the risks of shift work](#)