Working Irregular Hours

“Night time is really the best time to work. All the ideas are there to be yours because everyone else is asleep.”

Catherine O’Hara, Canadian comedienne (born 1954)

“ Asking people to work at night is a bit like throwing them into the sea to be aquatic for a week. It is possible but we are not designed to do it, so there are risks.”

Professor Simon Foulkard, a sleep expert from the University of Wales, quoted in the New Scientist in 2000

“Sometimes I stay up so late that I have my morning coffee before I go to bed.”

Anon

We live in a 24-hour, ‘always-on’ society. And that means that for many of us, the traditional nine-to-five work schedule is a distant memory. From health and medicine to the emergency services, from the entertainment and hospitality industries to retail and manufacturing, increasing numbers of us are now working irregular hours.

According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), more than 3.5 million people are now employed as shift workers in Britain. And it can be a way of life with considerable advantages. Working unorthodox hours can make time available to spend with children, devote to other projects, or simply bring in more money.

Research has shown, however, that shift working (especially at night) can cause difficulties. For many people, it is not a choice (and it’s often more junior employees who are affected). And even if it is, the disruption has the potential to cause physical and psychological problems, to say nothing of a higher risk of fatigue-induced accidents at work.

So if you want to take advantage of the benefits of working irregular hours, you will need to take some basic measures to help you cope. There’s no reason why shift working should not be rewarding and productive, it just takes a little planning and preparation.

If an organisation has employees working irregular hours, it has a legal duty of care to ensure that they can do their jobs safely and healthily. But there is also a lot that individuals can do to take responsibility for their wellbeing.
Advantages of irregular hours

For those workers whose organisations offer flexible working patterns, choosing to work irregular hours can make a lot of sense on many different levels.

Free time. Some people find that working outside normal working hours gives them time to dedicate to family commitments, alternative work projects or training opportunities. Someone who wants to spend the late afternoon and evening with their children, for instance, could be well suited to then going to work after the kids have gone to bed and going to sleep the following morning. Working a week of night shifts often entitles a worker to several days off afterwards, which also opens up time for different activities.

More pay. Irregular shifts are often better paid than regular office hours. Benefits can also include meals and free travel to and from work.

Autonomy. As there are fewer staff on duty, irregular shifts can demand a higher degree of self-reliance (there are fewer people around to ask if something goes wrong). Having to make a greater number of independent decisions can boost learning and knowledge of the job.

Predictable hours. The amount of time that people work at night often has to be limited for safety reasons. This means that there is less chance of running into over-time. When the shift ends, you really do go home. (This is, of course, the case in an ideal world. Doctors in particular can get drawn into extended shifts when dealing with emergencies.)

Health risks

Given the above arguments, one might wonder why anyone would want to work from nine to five. There are, however, some significant drawbacks to working irregular hours.

Surveys have shown that shift workers are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety. They are also at greater risk of a car accident and are prone to insomnia and memory lapses. While younger people have been shown to be a little more resilient to shift work, older workers can develop health problems including both cardiovascular and gastrointestinal disorders.

So why are irregular work patterns so disruptive to both our bodies and our minds? Unsurprisingly, scientists have focused on the interruption of sleep.

Our bodies are essentially designed to be awake during the day and asleep during the night, it is an evolved behaviour. The rhythm of this body clock is governed by what are known as ‘circadian rhythms’. Using cues such as the availability of daylight, our circadian rhythms regulate the manufacture of hormones in our body that either wake us up, or put us to sleep.

People who work at night must override the body’s natural circadian rhythms, reversing the normal sleep/wake cycle. This makes it hard for their bodies to access the deep sleep phases that are part of a normal night’s sleep. And because of the extra noise and light during the day, along with the cues from their inner body clock, it is much more likely that they will be woken up when they’re in a light sleep phase.

According to the Royal College of Physicians, most people need at least one hour of sleep for every two hours awake. If you manage less than this, you will begin to incur what they describe as a “sleep debt”. This sleep debt is cumulative, so the more sleep you miss, the more in debt you will be. The only way to pay it back is by catching up on lost sleep.

But if you don’t, you will begin to encounter fatigue. And while the science of sleep can be quite imprecise, no one is in any doubt about the impact of fatigue.
The perils of fatigue

Those who work either at night or early in the morning are particularly at risk of fatigue. The HSE defines fatigue as a decline in mental and/or physical performance that results from prolonged exertion, sleep loss and/or disruption of the internal clock.

That means that the more fatigued you are, the less alert you are, and the more likely you are to make mistakes. Not only that, but when you are tired, you are less able to assess your own performance, so you may not even be aware that you’re making mistakes.

A recent study into the effect of shift work looked at the different sleep patterns of marine workers, concluding that 70-80% of marine accidents were the result of human error. Fatigue has been identified as a contributor to major disasters such as the Challenger, Chernobyl, Clapham Junction and Exxon Valdez. Fatigue is said to cost the UK £115 - £240 million per year in terms of work accidents alone.

It’s no better once people leave work. Someone who hasn’t slept for 20 to 25 hours will exhibit the same hand-eye coordination as someone way over the legal driving limit for blood alcohol. In fact, one study from 2000 revealed that a lack of sleep caused as many car accidents in Britain as too much alcohol.

Leaving fatigue unaddressed not only puts you at severe risk of getting into an accident, it also grinds down your capacity to cope. Extended exposure to the stress hormones that can be triggered by fatigue can result in a range of symptoms affecting your physical, intellectual and emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

At the extreme end of the spectrum lies chronic fatigue, depression, illness and psychological burnout. This is why it is so important to look after yourself by attending to excessive fatigue by adopting a sensible lifestyle appropriate to your chosen work pattern.

Legal obligations

There is no specific health and safety legislation on shift working. Having said that, employers are bound by a range of laws governing duty of care in the workplace. According to the HSE, that duty includes removing or controlling the risks of fatigue by properly organizing and planning shift-work arrangements.

Some workers in certain sectors such as the railway and aviation industries and mobile workers in road and sea transport may also be subject to industry-specific legislation, which lay down specific requirements in relation to the organisation of working time.

The legal duty is on employers to manage risks from fatigue, irrespective of any individual’s willingness to work extra hours or preference for certain shift patterns for social reasons.
Practical self-care

As we have seen, working irregular hours (especially at night) can have a dramatic impact on your body. Having said that, there is plenty of action that you can take to keep yourself feeling fit, relaxed and calm.

Limit Shift Changes. Try to stay on one schedule for as long as possible. Shifting between day and night work is especially hard on the body.

Create the conditions for healthy sleep. Try to associate your bedroom with sleeping; that means not watching television, using a computer or playing computer games in bed. When you are trying to sleep, make your bedroom as dark as possible. Close the curtains and the door. Some people find that sleep masks help block the light, allowing for more refreshing sleep.

Get plenty of sleep before you change your work hours. If you’re moving onto a night shift, have a long lie-in on the day before you start, ideally until midday. Don’t go out drinking the night before as this will give you poor quality sleep. Taking an afternoon nap is another effective way of preparing for a different shift. If you’re moving on to an early morning shift, start going to bed early a few days before so that your body can adapt.

Don’t stop exercising. Do some exercise before your shift to give you more energy and keep you alert. A gentle walk after your shift can help you relax and unwind before you go to bed. While you’re at work, get some fresh air when you can.

Be careful of caffeine. Too much caffeine will leave you feeling nervous and jittery. In the long run, it will also make you more tired. If you do drink coffee, make sure you stop at least four hours before the end of your shift, so that your body has enough time to process the caffeine before you go to bed.

Light up the dark. If you’re working a lot during hours of darkness, try to be in as much bright light as possible. Any bright light, even if it is intermittent, will help your body regulate its sleep/wake cycle.

Eat and drink well. Make sure you drink plenty of water. Being dehydrated can sap your energy and lead to fatigue, muscle weakness, dizziness and other symptoms. Disrupted circadian rhythms can affect appetite, so make sure you have a nutritious meal before you go to work, something sustaining to eat while you are there, and an easily digestible meal when you get home. (Loading up on sugary snacks will cause wild fluctuations in your blood sugar levels that will give you temporary bursts of energy but will ultimately leave you feeling exhausted).

When you finish work. Be very careful of driving home, especially if you have worked overnight. It may be better to use public transport or have someone come and pick you up. When you get home, avoid alcohol as this will affect the quality of your sleep. Try and avoid using sleep medication unless it is absolutely necessary. Make sure you consult your GP if you feel you really need sleeping pills.