the Sleep Charity

ADVICE SHEET

Sleep Tips for Shift workers

Working shifts – whether that's permanent nights, rotating shifts, split shifts or being on call – can seriously affect your sleep.

When your sleep is disrupted, it doesn't just leave you feeling tired. It can also impact your eating habits, exercise routine and overall wellbeing.

Lack of sleep can slow your reaction times, affect your judgement and make it harder to concentrate or remember things. You may feel more irritable or short-tempered. Over time, ongoing sleep deprivation has been linked to serious health conditions including high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes and stroke. Severe sleep loss can even cause hallucinations and changes in your senses.

The good news is there are practical steps you can take to protect your sleep and stay healthy.

Create the Right Sleep Environment

Make your bedroom as sleep-friendly as possible:

- Keep it cool, dark and quiet.
- Invest in blackout curtains or blinds.
- Use an eye mask and ear plugs if needed.
- Make sure your mattress and pillows are comfortable.
- Ask family or housemates to help keep noise to a minimum while you're sleeping.

Be Smart About Food and Drink

What you eat and drink during your shift matters.

- Avoid relying on caffeine to get through the night — it can make it harder to sleep later.
- Try to stop caffeine at least 5–6 hours before bedtime.
- Choose lighter meals rather than heavy, fatty or processed foods.
- If healthy options aren't easily available at work, bring food from home.

Wake Up the Right Way

When it's time to get up, light helps reset your body clock.

- Consider using a sunrise alarm lamp that gradually brightens the room. It's a gentler and more natural way to wake up than a sudden alarm.

Make Time for Recovery Sleep

Use days off or weekends to catch up on extra rest where possible. After your final night shift:

- Have a short morning nap (1–2 hours), ideally before midday.
- Then get up and try to follow a normal daytime routine.
- Eat and exercise at your usual times.
- Aim for your regular bedtime that evening.
- It may take a couple of nights to reset your sleep pattern.

For more information visit
thesleepcharity.org.uk

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Wind Down Before Bed

No matter what time you go to sleep, create a wind-down routine:

- Avoid phones, tablets and other screens before bed.
- Try reading, gentle stretching, yoga or meditation.
- Breathing exercises can help reduce stress and make it easier to fall asleep.

If You Share a Bed

Different schedules can be tricky.

- Ask your partner to get dressed in another room.
- If their alarm wakes you, agree not to engage so you can drift back to sleep.
- Use a "Do Not Disturb" sign on your door.
- Put your phone on silent during sleep hours.

Travelling Home Safely

Fatigue increases the risk of accidents.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents **(RoSPA)** identifies shift workers as a high-risk group for fatigue-related crashes, especially after night shifts.

If possible:

- Use public transport or a taxi after a night shift.
- If you must drive, consider a short walk or light exercise first to boost alertness.
- If you feel sleepy, delay your journey and take a short power nap.
- Wearing sunglasses on the way home can help reduce the alerting effect of daylight (but use caution if driving).

Napping: Do It Properly

If your workplace allows naps **(especially in high-risk roles such as night driving or monitoring tasks)**, they should be properly managed with appropriate facilities and scheduled breaks of around 40 minutes.

At home, a 90-minute nap in the afternoon or evening before a night shift can boost energy — particularly when switching from day to night shifts.

Shift work isn't easy, but small changes can make a big difference.

Protecting your sleep protects your health, your safety and your performance - both at work and at home.