

# RiskTopics

## Managing Workplace Fatigue

Working while fatigued may slow down reaction times, reduce attention or reduce concentration, limit short-term memory, and impair judgment. High levels of fatigue may create unsafe working conditions. Effective management of fatigue is essential for the safety and health of all workers.<sup>1</sup>



### Introduction

Organizations must understand what fatigue is and what causes it to occur on the job so they may take actions to control it. If employers and employees can identify fatigue-related events and the sources of fatigue, they may be better able to develop strategies to manage fatigue. This may help keep workers safe and healthy and add more enjoyment to their personal lives.

### Discussion

#### What is fatigue?

Often when people think of fatigue, they think of being tired or sleepy. But fatigue isn't simply about not getting enough sleep or being a little bit tired. Fatigue describes the body's response to a prolonged period of sleeplessness, physical or mental exertion, or a combination.

Fatigue has a similar impact on the body to alcohol: impaired judgment, slow response times, lack of alertness, distraction, reduced ability to process information, lapses in memory, poorer perception of risk, and lack of coordination. Fatigue can slow down reaction times, reduce attention or concentration, limit short-term memory and impair judgment. It is easy to see why fatigue may sometimes be the root cause of accidents in the workplace.

#### What causes fatigue while on the job?

Our bodies go through a daily cycle, known as the circadian rhythm. This cycle naturally decides when we are most alert and most sleepy and is affected by various environmental factors including light and temperature. In a normal circadian rhythm, sleepiness peaks in the early hours of the morning. Anything that disturbs our circadian rhythm can have an impact on fatigue, such as:

- Badly designed shift patterns
- Extended working hours, i.e. overtime, on-call work, working from home following a day spent in the office
- Long periods of driving
- Business travel
- Second jobs
- Long commutes
- Blue light from LED lights, tablets, and mobile phones

Fatigue can also be associated with other workplace factors such as stress, physically or mentally demanding tasks, or working in hot environments.<sup>1</sup>

## Guidance

Employee training topics might include

- How to manage fatigue at work and home
- Responsibilities for managing fatigue
- Fatigue reduction strategies<sup>2</sup>

Time management and reporting

- Hours worked should be monitored by supervisors to ensure that employees are not working longer hours than expected
- Consideration should be given to an employee's daily commute, second jobs, home working arrangements, overtime, etc. within the time monitoring process
- Any employee that is regularly exceeding the appropriate number of hours should be flagged and counseled

Management might consider evaluating the following areas to limit employee fatigue<sup>3</sup>

- Evaluating break frequency and length
- Adjusting or limiting night shifts, shift length, and overtime
- Job rotation to vary tasks
- Possible use of buddy systems
- Providing areas where employees might rest or take brief naps
- Periodic review of applicable employment policies

- Provide a means for employee feedback regarding fatigue, addressing such areas as:
  - Do they understand how to manage fatigue?
  - Are shift patterns working for them?
  - How fatiguing do they find the shift patterns?
  - Do they have any suggestions for improving fatigue?
  - What works for them and what doesn't?

Employee wellness or assistance programs

- Employee Wellness and Employee Assistance Programs may be useful in helping employees manage stress and other factors that impact the quality of sleep.
- Where sleep problems are identified, employees might be referred to a sleep disorder management clinic by their treating physicians. Sleep disorder specialists can work with employees to help identify underlying causes and manage sleep disorders.

Incident review and management

- When incidents or accidents occur, investigations should check hours worked, shift patterns, witness interviews, etc. to flag when fatigue may be a factor in the incident so that the root cause of incidents can be properly investigated and addressed and trends in fatigue risk can be analyzed.

## Conclusion

Fatigue due to insufficient sleep or interruption of one's sleep pattern may become a significant safety issue if left unchecked over time. When it is not recognized and addressed, it may result in injuries, property damage, defective products, and other negative consequences. Employee awareness and organizational intervention are essential in battling fatigue in the workplace.

## References

1. NIOSH. "Work and Fatigue". December 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/fatigue/default.html#:~:text=Fatigue%20has%20been%20broadly%20described,which%20disrupt%20or%20shorten%20sleep>.
2. Khosro Sadeghniaat-Haghighi and Zohreh Yazdi. "Fatigue Management in the Workplace". June 2015. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4525425/>
3. OSHA. "Long Work Hours, Extended or Irregular Shifts, and Worker Fatigue". December 2022. <https://www.osha.gov/worker-fatigue>

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