



Occupational Health
Clinics for Ontario
Workers Inc.

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Shiftwork's impact on workers

Shiftwork, the simple use of the word will unease most Northern Ontario workers. Roughly, 25% of the North American working population currently faces the realities of shiftwork. Considering our most prominent are in the mining, hospital and transportation sectors, that percentage would be greater. The term "Shiftwork" generally implies the alternation of work hours on a non-traditional schedule, also including changes from days and nights.

Shiftwork not only affects the worker but family and friends as well. Studies have shown that working shifts significantly increases your risks of health problems. The constant changing of shifts can disrupt your body's circadian rhythm (internal clock) which increases chances of fatigue, stress, obesity, depression and illness.

Studies have also found shiftwork to be even worse for women, increasing the risk of breast cancer by 60%. Because estrogen release is indirectly related your body's circadian rhythm, working shifts also causes irregularities in menstrual cycles and even increases the risk of miscarriages and pre-mature births. In the workplace, research has proven that injuries and human errors, such as nursing medication miscalculations, are increased during night shifts/shiftwork.

If avoid shiftwork is avoidable, it is recommended that you do so in order to easily maintain a healthy lifestyle. However, if working shifts is inevitable, here are some things to help you stay healthy physically and mentally. Many of these may seem obvious, however, they often overlooked or forgotten due the fast paced nature most shift workers' lives.

1. Make the effort to plan healthy and balanced meals for your shifts. Avoid the excessive intake of salt, caffeine, alcohol, greasy foods.
2. Plan social activities in advance.
3. Learn how to recognize and reduce stress factors in your daily life. Utilize relaxation techniques such as music or reading a book.
4. If possible, schedule your shifts to allow a longer period for your body to readjust to the changes in time.
5. Set aside time for you and your spouse as well as time with your children.
6. Prepare your bedroom accordingly for sleeping during the day. (Ensure that it is quiet, dark and free of distractions.)

Cory McWilliams is a 4th year Student Nurse with the Occupational Health Clinic for Ontario Workers Inc. (OHCOW). If you have an occupational health topic you would like addressed in a future column, contact OHCOW at (705) 523-2330.