

What is night work?

Night work refers to work carried out during the period between midnight and 7 a.m. on the following day.

What does your 'circadian rhythm' mean?

The human body follows a daily rhythm, which involves the fluctuation of over 100 body functions, with regular peaks and troughs, in a 24-hour cycle. These daily cycles are called circadian rhythms. The word 'circadian' comes from the Latin 'circa dies', meaning 'about a day'.

Circadian rhythms regulate body functions such as temperature, metabolism, digestion, blood pressure, secretion of adrenalin, sleeping and waking. These rhythmical processes form the body's internal clock and are co-ordinated so as to allow for high activity (peaks) during the day and low activity (troughs) at night. Hence, this is one reason why people often feel most active and alert around 4-6pm, and sleepiest around 4-6am.

What are the possible effects of night/shift work?

Night/Shift work may cause or contribute to the following effects:

Biological Effects: cardiovascular disorders / gastrointestinal disorders / circadian dysrhythmia

Psychosocial Effects: sleep loss / fatigue lowered performance / increased accidents / stress

Individual Effects: disrupted family and social life, e.g. isolation from friends, family, social events and celebrations, sports matches, etc.

Does the employer have to assess and monitor the health of night workers?

Yes, the employer must offer the employee an assessment, free of charge, in relation to the effects, if any, on their health because of night working. This assessment must be offered: before he/she employs a person as a night worker, and at regular intervals during the period that the person is employed as such a worker

Who carries out these health assessments?

A registered medical practitioner or a person acting under his or her supervision must carry out this assessment.

Is the employer informed of the outcome of such a health assessment?

The medical practitioner informs the employer concerned of his/her opinion as to whether the employee is fit or unfit to perform the night work concerned, **taking into account medical confidentiality**. If their opinion is that the employee is unfit to perform that night work **only** because of the particular conditions under which that work is performed, it may be possible that the same employee could be considered fit to work if certain changes in working conditions were made, i.e. in limited circumstances.

Also, there are provisions under the Protection of Pregnant, Post Natal and Breastfeeding Employees in the General Application Regulations 2007 whereby a registered medical

practitioner certifies that it is necessary for the safety or health of an employee during pregnancy or for 14 weeks following childbirth that she should not be required to perform night work, the employer shall not oblige her to perform night work during that period.

However, neither a registered medical practitioner nor a person acting under his/her supervision can disclose the clinical details of the assessment to any person other than the employee concerned (or a person designated under section 63 of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005

What must an employer do if a night worker becomes ill or shows symptoms of ill health that is/are connected to night/shift work?

If a night worker becomes unwell for reasons connected with night work, the employer must reassign him or her to suitable duties that do not involve night work, where this is possible.

What factors should employers consider so as to minimise the adverse safety and health effects of shift-work and night-work?

- Include shift and night workers in all company training initiatives
- Introduce family-friendly policies that include the difficulties faced by shift and night workers
- Educate managers, shift workers and night workers about the need for proper sleep and the dangers of fatigue
- Ensure all night and shift workers are considered in all appropriate risk

assessments and workstation assessments

- Adjust exposure levels to noise, chemicals, physical hazards, etc. as necessary, as workplace exposure levels are based on 8-hour reference periods, and not extended shifts
- Consider employee safety going to and coming from work due to fatigue, and particularly at unsociable hours; advise on the use of carpools, public transport, rested drivers and taxis
- Ensure car parks and external entrances are well lit at night time
- Provide good meals facilities for night/shift workers
- Ensure proper ventilation of workplace
- Install bright lights where practicable in work areas (to signal to the body to be alert and awake)
- Offer alternatives to night and shift workers who have difficulty adjusting to such work

What can individuals themselves do to cope better with night/shift work?

- Exercise before your shift starts
- Take a nap of 1-4 hours before the first night shift
- Keep to a regular sleeping pattern
- Have your largest meal after your day-time sleep, before starting the night shift
- After your last night shift, have a short sleep and then go to bed early that night

- Eat balanced and regular meals
- Only have a light meal in the middle of a night shift; choose small portions
- Avoid fatty foods entirely during your shift
- Only have caffeinated drinks before or early during your shift
- Avoid alcohol and smoking before going to bed
- Take short breaks during your shift
- Try to do some exercise during breaks
- If possible, do the lightest/easiest tasks between 4-6am



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

Occupational Health

Department

HSE West

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**Advise to Healthcare Workers regarding
a Night and Shift Worker Assessment**



**For more information contact your
Occupational Health Department**

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