

Prioritizing Sleep & Managing Fatigue



PRIORITIZING SLEEP

Health care workers are at particular risk for poor sleep. Healthy sleep is key for physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Here are some tips to promote healthy sleep.

Take the time to value yourself and what you do for others.

- 1. Create a schedule that prioritizes regular, sufficient sleep.** Work and personal obligations can be time consuming, making it hard to get sufficient sleep. Whenever you can, try to keep a regular bedtime and wake time and schedule regular meal and exercise times appropriately. Having these anchors can help you obtain sufficient rest, nutrition and exercise.
- 2. Get at least 7 hours of sleep per 24 hours.** Remember, some won't feel restored until they sleep 8 hours or more. If getting that much sleep in one bout is impossible due to your work schedule, try to take a short "power nap" for an energy boost. Allow yourself time to become fully alert after your short nap.
- 3. Give yourself a "buffer" before you head to bed.** Disconnect from the stress of your day to relax 30-60 minutes before bedtime. Avoid heavy exercise, bright lights, or disturbing images and content during the hour before bed. Examples of relaxing activities may include reading a book, light stretching, music, or meditation; these can help the brain to transition to sleep.
- 4. Reserve your bed for sleep.** Tempting though it may be to crawl under the covers for the latest episodes of your favorite show, don't do it! Avoid all electronics — including your phone — when in bed. Engage in behaviors that help connect your bed with sleep. If you awaken and find it hard to return to sleep, consider leaving the bedroom and doing something non-electronic, quiet, and relaxing, and return to bed when you are ready to fall asleep.
- 5. Avoid alcohol and excessive caffeine.** A drink at the end of a hard day may be relaxing, but it can disturb your sleep and reduce sleep quality and continuity. Don't drink alcohol within 3 hours of bedtime. Caffeine in limited quantities can help increase alertness temporarily, but it may disrupt sleep if taken in excess or too close to bedtime.
- 6. Make your sleep space a sanctuary.** A dark, quiet environment can protect sleep. Remove clutter, cover windows, and keep your electronics powered off. If you are a shift worker, set boundaries and let others know when you plan to sleep so that you have a chance to get uninterrupted rest.
- 7. Stay active and head outdoors if possible.** Not only is regular activity a good way to help combat work stress, but outdoor light timed during your wake period can help maintain your body's sleep-wake rhythm.

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MANAGING FATIGUE

It is important for all health care workers to prioritize sleep to sustain alertness and performance while at work. The tips below may help mitigate on-the-job fatigue. However, following these tips cannot fully compensate for the effects of sleep loss, circadian misalignment, stress, or work overload. Whenever possible, achieving adequate rest and sleep is key.

Prioritize sleep and seek help for any sleep problems that arise.

- 1. Bank sleep on days off.** Some studies have demonstrated that “banking” sleep by getting up to 10 hours of sleep at night minimizes performance impairment during a subsequent period of sleep restriction.
- 2. Use caffeine strategically.** Caffeine is more effective if you only use it when you need it. Choose caffeine-free beverages during the day when you are rested and reserve caffeine for situations when you are feeling sleepy. Avoid large doses of caffeine because you may feel a “crash” or get a headache after the caffeine wears off. Consuming the amount of caffeine in a regular cup of tea or coffee can help sustain alertness and performance.
- 3. Nap strategically.** For extended-duty or overnight shifts, consider taking a brief nap in the afternoon before, or on break during, the shift to reduce your fatigue at work. Note that post-nap grogginess may impair your performance upon waking from longer naps (e.g., > 30 minutes), so plan around duties carefully. Taking caffeine just before a “power nap” may reduce the grogginess that one normally experiences upon waking.
- 4. Use bright light, especially on the night shift.** Your body’s internal clock is reset by light exposure each day. This causes your body to promote sleepiness at night and alertness during the day. Exposure to light at night helps promote alertness at night. During a night shift, spend time in a bright room when you can.
- 5. Take an activity break or microbreak.** Engaging in a vigorous activity or stretching for several minutes can improve alertness and performance for a short period of time after the activity break. Aerobic activities such as taking a walk, short jog or bike ride can improve alertness and performance on the night shift. Taking a shorter microbreak — for example stretching the head, neck, and shoulders for a few minutes — has been shown to improve alertness and performance during surgical procedures.
- 6. Use checklists and communicate with your team.** Fatigue can increase the risk of mistakes. However, using tools like checklists and cross-checking procedures with colleagues has been shown to reduce fatigue-related errors.