

What can employees do?

People vary in the way they adjust to and cope with shift work. Some people will adjust to night shift or early shift work better than others. For others, such as those with health conditions, lower levels of fitness, insomnia and domestic responsibilities, it can be harder to adapt.

Listed below are some examples of measures, which can be found within HSE resources, to reduce the individual health impacts and safety issues related to shift work:

Eating small amounts often throughout the night will help keep energy levels up. Foods that are easy to digest such as pasta, rice, bread, salad, fruit, vegetables and milk products are best. Fatty or heavy meals are more difficult to digest, which can make individuals feel drowsy rather than alert. They may also disturb sleep. Sugary foods such as chocolate may provide a short-term energy boost, but this will be followed by a dip in energy levels.

Employees should obtain medical advice from their doctor and/or occupational health department if they require regular medication such as insulin for diabetes or suffer from a chronic condition such as epilepsy. Employees should discuss reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010/Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Northern Ireland) e.g. ensuring adequate breaks, adjusting shift cycles etc.

Have a short sleep before the first night shift.

If coming off night shifts, have a short sleep and go to bed earlier that night.

Keep to a suitable sleep schedule once identified.

Take regular short breaks during the shift if possible.

Get up and walk around during breaks.

Plan to do more stimulating work at the times when feeling most drowsy.

Keep in contact with co-workers, as this may help all individuals to stay alert.

Consider using public transport or taxis rather than driving.

Exercise briefly before making a journey.

Share driving if possible.

Support from GP or occupational health

Employees working regular night shifts are entitled to a free night worker health assessment.

Employees should contact their line manager and occupational health service to find out more.

Employees experiencing health problems related to shift work e.g. difficulties sleeping, should seek prompt advice from their GP and/or occupational health service.

Reporting concerns

Employees should feel supported and able to raise any concerns about risks such as the impact of fatigue and poorly designed shift patterns on patient safety to their manager and/or trade union safety representative. Any near misses or incidents related to fatigue must be reported as per local policies and a just culture applied to learn from incidents rather than apportion blame.

Professional responsibilities

While employers have a legal responsibility to protect the health and safety of employees and patients, healthcare professionals have a responsibility to practice safely and raise concerns under their respective professional codes.

Issues such as an inability to take scheduled rest breaks, insufficient rest periods between shifts and pressure to carry out excessive overtime are all legitimate issues to act on and raise professional concerns about if they are leading to fatigue and subsequent risk of errors and risks to patient safety.

Employees should also consider the impact of multiple jobs on working hours on their ability to practice safely.