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Night shifts

More and more people are expected to work nights, but how do you adjust your body clock to the new routine and are there health risks involved? TheSite fills you in.

How many people work shifts?

Around 17% of all employees in the UK (about 4.1 million) work shifts, and while this is to be expected in industries such as the medical profession and security, our move into a 24 hour world has snowballed the number of professions that expect their employees to work nights.

What are the risks?

There may be more money in shift work but there are also risks. One study conducted last year showed that working night shifts makes you three times as likely to suffer from heart disease. Another study from 2000 revealed that a lack of sleep causes as many car accidents as too much alcohol with 45,000 Brits either seriously injured or killed as a result of driver tiredness.

Poor sleeping habits have also been linked to mental health problems, cancer, common colds, depression, diabetes, obesity and strokes.

Why the sleep problems:

As we are not naturally designed to work nights shift work will mess with your sleep patterns. However, with a little forward planning you'll adjust in no time.

On average, your body needs approximately 5 - 9 hours sleep every 24 hours. Doctors recommend 8 hours. It doesn't matter whether you hit the sack during the day or night. What counts is that you establish a routine. This means going to bed at the same time, and waking up at a set time too. The waking at the same time is more important. Get a pattern going, and your body clock will soon be setting itself.

To guarantee the shut-eye you so desperately need:

Avoid eating too much before you head for bed.

Steer clear of stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine.

Allow yourself wind down time between getting home and going to sleep.

If you're kipping during daylight hours, and don't want to be awoken by the sun glaring through the glass, try hanging drapes or black out curtains over the windows.

Also make sure your bed itself is properly supported. A firm level mattress is essential, so stick a sheet of plywood underneath if necessary.

Don't use over-the-counter sleeping pills for more than 2 weeks as you can become dependent; consult your GP.

Use your bedroom for sleeping and sex only: that means no TV, no computer, no work.

To stay awake on your shift:

Twilight is the hardest time to stay awake. At around 2 or 3 am make sure you have enough stimulating work to do. Keep busy.

Don't get too comfortable or too warm.

Use fresh air/ a short walk rather than stimulants to keep yourself awake.

Make sure there is plenty of light in your workplace.

Try not to go out before your night shift, this will make you more tired, and alcohol will make it even worse.

Do some exercise before your shift to give you more energy and keep you alert.

Make sure it isn't too quiet - put the radio on or some music, or chat to colleagues.

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