



# *Night-shift* survival guide

Night working affects us all differently but most of us find it difficult, so BMAS has put together some tips on how to make night shifts less of a nightmare.

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**T**he human body follows daily cycles across 24-hour periods, known as circadian rhythms. One of the most important is the sleep-wake cycle, which is influenced by, among other things, light.

At night, lack of light prompts our bodies to produce melatonin which promotes sleep. Conversely, exposure to daylight makes us more alert and our activity levels increase accordingly. That's why it's usual to work in the day and rest at night. However, there are times – and jobs – that demand night working (working at least three hours between 11pm and 6am).

When our sleep-wake cycle is disturbed by working night shifts, it can be harder to obtain the right amount and quality of sleep in the daytime. We can also find it more difficult to be productive when working at night. Over prolonged periods, the resulting fatigue can have a cumulative negative effect on performance and wellbeing.

Night working can lead to chronic long-term sleep deprivation. Some find it easier to sleep in the day than others but, for those unable to get sufficient shuteye, working nights can result in cardiovascular and gastrointestinal issues. Some groups of employees can be particularly affected: younger and older workers, new and expectant mothers, those with pre-existing mental or physical health conditions, and those taking medication. Sleep deprivation also affects our ability to think, concentrate and remember. Judgement and decision-making can be affected, our reaction times are slower and our stress-tolerance is reduced. It also makes us more accident-prone.

The extensive research on night working is hard to summarise due to the many shift variations, but the general consensus is that disruption to our sleep-wake cycle has an adverse effect on health. In recognition of this, night workers are entitled to receive regular and free health assessments by a qualified health professional. This could be in the form of a questionnaire. Additionally, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 requires employers to assess any risks to their employees' health and safety in the workplace, which includes considering how the potential hazards of working at night are controlled.

There are also a few things we can do to help ourselves adjust to sleeping in the day and working at night. Here's the BMAS night-shift survival guide ...

## Mirror your daytime routine

When establishing a nightly routine, try to mirror the meals and activities of your usual daytime routine. For example, go for your "morning" run when you wake at 7 pm, followed by breakfast at 8 pm, then have your evening meal when you get home from work at 9 am.



## Nap when you can

If you can manage to grab a quick power nap in the middle of your night shift, there's evidence it can have a beneficial effect on your wellbeing.

## Create calm conditions

Ensure your bedroom is relaxing, well ventilated, cool and quiet. Use blackout blinds to minimise light levels and consider playing white noise or soothing music to mask external noise. Avoid regular use of sedatives as this can lead to dependency and addiction.



## Control the chaos

Ask family members to minimise their mayhem. If necessary, wear ear plugs and an eye mask to block out distractions. Turn off your phone and put a 'do not disturb' sign on your bedroom door (or front door if you're home alone and trying to sleep).

## Experiment

Experiment by going to bed at different times. Do you sleep better if you go to bed when you get home, or if you stay up until later in the day?





## Eat little and often

During the night shift, stick to your daytime eating routine, but opt for smaller portions than you'd usually eat in the day – a large meal can make you sleepy. If possible, try to leave 3 hours between your last meal and bedtime to give you time to digest the food before sleeping.



## Watch what you eat

Avoid fried, spicy or processed foods as these are harder to digest and can leave you feeling lethargic. Instead opt for fruit, vegetables, dairy products and slow-release carbohydrates such as potatoes or pasta.

## Quality thirst quenchers

Switch stimulating drinks laden with sugar, caffeine or alcohol for hydrating alternatives like water, squash, and fruit or herbal teas. These will help you stay refreshed and energised.



## Squeeze in sunshine

It can be beneficial to your mind and body to get some sunshine and a vitamin D hit before or after your night shift, so try to grab some time outdoors.

## Staggered shifts

If you need to change shifts, aim to transition from a morning shift to an afternoon shift, or from an afternoon shift to a night shift. It's easier to delay sleep than to try to sleep earlier.

## Keep up the momentum

If you're seated for long periods at work, get up and move regularly. Save the most stimulating tasks for when you'll appreciate the energy boost they provide. Keep the lights bright and stay in contact with other night-working colleagues, to help keep everyone's spirits up.

## Involve your family

Night shifts can be tough on the whole family, with routines and social lives thrown into disarray. Partners and children can find it difficult to adjust, so it's important to work together to maintain a sense of normality. Try to adapt routines, such as domestic chores, to maintain harmony. Share shift patterns with friends and family so your schedule can be factored into future plans.

## Calculate your commute

Knowing you're likely to be tired, less able to concentrate and more accident-prone, think carefully about safety on your commute to and from work. Consider lift-sharing, public transport or taking a taxi. Exercising or having a coffee before driving can also be helpful.

## Look after your body

Maintain a healthy lifestyle. Cutting down on smoking and alcohol, eating a balanced diet, and being physically fit are not only good for your health, they'll also help your body cope with sleep disturbance.

## Consult your GP

If you have any pre-existing health conditions or require regular medication, seek advice from your GP before undertaking night work.