Shift Work and Sleep

A shift worker is anyone who follows a work schedule that is outside of the typical 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. business day. In the past few decades, the United States has become increasingly dependent upon shift workers to meet the demands of globalization and our 24-hour society.

From a competitive standpoint, shift work is an excellent way to increase production and customer service without major increases in infrastructure. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, millions of Americans are considered shift workers, including doctors and nurses, pilots, bridge builders, police officers, customer service representatives, and commercial drivers.

However, while shift work does create potential productivity advantages, it also has many inherent risks. Some of the most serious and persistent problems shift workers face are frequent sleep disturbances and associated excessive sleepiness.

Sleepiness or fatigue in the workplace can lead to poor concentration, absenteeism, accidents, errors, injuries, and fatalities. The issue becomes more alarming when you consider that shift workers are often employed in the most dangerous of jobs, such as firefighting, emergency medical services, law enforcement, and security.

Managers and policy makers who are responsible for writing and enforcing rules regarding employee work hours must address the specific issues of a 24-hour work force in order to succeed and benefit from such a labor force. Although addressing these issues may require some investment up front for training and other measures, the bottom line is that improved sleep in workers may lead to improved productivity. In fact, to ignore the needs of the shift worker is reckless and irresponsible when you consider that billions of dollars in yearly costs, thousands of deaths, and some of the most notorious of modern catastrophes—such as the failure of the Space Shuttle Columbia and crash of the Exxon Valdez—have been attributed to human fatigue.

According to the International Classifications of Sleep Disorders, shift workers are at an increased risk for a variety of chronic illnesses such as heart disease and gastrointestinal diseases. Whether this is related to the fact that shift workers are awake and active during the night hours or because they tend to get fewer hours of sleep overall than traditional workers is not
known. Also, shift workers often miss out on important family and social events due to their work schedules. Most managers recognize that understanding and addressing these issues improves employee morale, performance, safety and health, and can dramatically improve the bottom line of the company.

People who work in the transportation industry face some of the most serious challenges. They battle fatigue because of their irregular sleep schedules and endure long, tedious hours at the controls or behind the wheel. In fact, research suggests that drowsy driving caused by sleep deprivation is one of the leading safety hazards in the transportation industry.

According to the International Classifications of Sleep Disorders, shift work sleep disorder is a circadian rhythm sleep disorder. Circadian rhythm refers to the 24-hour rhythmic output of the human biological clock. It is considered a disorder because of the frequency with which people suffer from sleep disturbance and excessive sleepiness in trying to adapt to a shift work schedule.

Symptoms:

Excessive sleepiness, the main complaint of people with shift-work sleep disorder.

Other symptoms include:

- Insomnia
- Disrupted sleep schedules
- Reduced performance
- Difficulties with personal relationships
- Irritability/depressed mood

Here are some tips for sleeping during the day:

- Wear dark glasses to block out the sunlight on your way home.
- Keep the same bedtime and wake time schedule, even on weekends.
- Eliminate noise and light from your sleep environment by using eye masks and earplugs.
- Avoid caffeinated beverages and food close to bedtime.
- Avoid alcohol. Although it may seem to improve sleep initially, tolerance develops quickly and it will soon disturb sleep.