

Worker Fatigue: Preventing Accidents During Schedule Shifts



Changes to work schedules can affect employees in every sector, from healthcare and manufacturing to construction, transportation, retail, hospitality, and office environments. Moving from day shifts to nights, extending working hours, rotating schedules, or changing start times with little notice can disrupt the body's natural sleep-wake cycle and reduce alertness at work.

For OHS managers and HR directors, worker fatigue should be treated as both a health and safety concern and a scheduling issue. Fatigue can impair judgment, reaction time, concentration, memory, and coordination, increasing the likelihood of mistakes and workplace accidents.

How Schedule Changes Affect Alertness

The body's circadian rhythm helps regulate sleep, alertness, body temperature, and other biological functions over a roughly 24-hour period. Employees generally adapt to sleeping and waking at predictable times, which means sudden scheduling changes can make it difficult to obtain enough restorative sleep.

A worker who normally starts at 8 a.m., for example, may struggle when suddenly assigned an overnight shift. Similarly, employees moving repeatedly between days, evenings, and nights may never fully adjust to one schedule.

Fatigue can also accumulate when employees work extended shifts, consecutive long days, overtime, or multiple jobs. Commuting time and family responsibilities can further reduce the amount of time available for rest between shifts.

Employers should pay particular attention to schedules that provide employees with limited recovery time or require significant changes to normal sleeping patterns.

Fatigue Can Lead to Serious Accidents

Fatigue does not simply mean feeling tired. A fatigued employee may react more slowly to hazards, overlook important details, make poor decisions, or briefly lose concentration.

In safety-sensitive workplaces, the consequences can be significant. A fatigued driver may miss a traffic signal or react too slowly to changing road conditions. A forklift operator may fail to notice a pedestrian. A machine operator could skip a safety step or place a hand too close to moving equipment.

Construction and maintenance workers may experience falls, tool-related injuries, or errors while working at heights. Healthcare employees may make medication or documentation mistakes. Even in office environments, fatigue can contribute to errors, reduced productivity, poor decision-making, and incidents while employees are driving to or from work.

Employers should also recognize warning signs such as repeated yawning, difficulty concentrating, slowed responses, irritability, unusually frequent mistakes, or employees

appearing to struggle to remain awake.

Reduce the Impact of Schedule Changes

Where operationally possible, employers should avoid abrupt or extreme scheduling changes. Providing employees with advance notice allows them to gradually adjust their sleep schedules and personal responsibilities.

Rotating shifts should also be designed thoughtfully. Frequent movement between drastically different start times can make adaptation difficult. Organizations may benefit from reviewing whether rotations can occur less frequently or progress in a more predictable direction.

Managers should consider workload as well as shift length. An employee working a demanding overnight shift may require different break arrangements or task scheduling than someone performing the same work during normal daytime hours.

Check In and Consider Individual Needs

Supervisors should encourage employees to report fatigue concerns without automatically treating those concerns as performance problems. A worker who says they are too fatigued to safely operate equipment, drive, or perform a hazardous task may be identifying an important safety risk.

Managers can check in with workers following significant schedule changes and ask whether they are experiencing difficulties adapting. Temporary adjustments, additional rest periods, modified duties, gradual schedule transitions, or other accommodations may be appropriate depending on the circumstances.

Where fatigue may be connected to a medical condition, disability, pregnancy, medication, or another protected need, employers should also consider whether accommodation obligations are triggered.

Plan Scheduling With Fatigue Prevention in Mind

Fatigue-related incidents are often preventable. Employers can reduce risk by looking beyond immediate staffing requirements and considering how scheduling decisions affect workers over several days or weeks.

Tracking overtime, consecutive shifts, minimum rest periods, shift rotations, near misses, and fatigue reports can help identify patterns before an accident occurs.

Ultimately, safer scheduling is about maintaining adequate recovery time and recognizing that alertness is an important workplace safety control. By making schedule changes gradually, checking in with affected employees, and responding early to fatigue concerns, employers can protect workers while maintaining safer and more reliable operations.