

Healthcare professionals: sleep for your own health

The NHS functions around the clock. Many NHS staff regularly work night-shifts as part of their routine duties.

Natural Sleep Rhythms

Our brains and bodies function on a natural cycle of wake and sleep, with our normal pattern being for us to be awake during the day and asleep at night.

Sleep is an essential requirement for our overall health. Without enough good quality sleep, we all rapidly start to see negative effects, both on our physical health but also on our mental functioning and health.

This natural cycling of wake and sleep – our circadian rhythm – is driven by our body clock. The body clock is also affected by many environmental cues, including light, timing of meals, and exercise. There is an independent need for sleep which increases the longer we have been awake, and which can only be reduced by sleeping, just like hunger can only be reduced by eating food.

When we act against our body clock, we can feel fatigued, disorientated and function less effectively – many people are familiar with this effect as ‘jet lag’ when we move rapidly from one world time zone to another.

Working Night Shifts

We are not physiologically evolved to function at night-time as we do in daytime.

Night-shift workers sleep less well in the day, have increased risk of accidents, are less alert and perform less well than day-shift workers. Long-term effects on night-shift worker’s health have been demonstrated, including increased incidence of cancer and other diseases in night-shift workers.

The effect of relative sleep deprivation in night-shift workers has been implicated in a significant number of accidents, including deaths in road traffic accidents after a night shift.

These effects are well-recognised by other professions, such as airline pilots.

There is a risk that doctors and other healthcare workers working night-shifts will be more likely to make simple mistakes and avoidable errors, leading to risks to patient safety.

For all these reasons, it is essential that professionals working night-shifts, especially in intense, demanding hospital roles, which often require the ability to respond rapidly and to make key decisions quickly and competently, take steps to optimise their sleep around night-shifts as much as possible.

Sleep for your own health

At Evelina London, we strongly believe in supporting the health of our team.

Since 2014 we have included a short session on 'sleep for your own health' in the induction session of all junior doctors starting work in our hospital.

More recently, this session has been included in the London School of Paediatrics and Child Health induction programme, for every new ST1 paediatric trainee starting in region.

The session covers, in approximately 30 minutes, the essentials of basic sleep physiology, the key components of a good core sleep routine, strategies to support optimal functioning while working night shift and tips on how to best recover after working night shifts.

This advice is summarised in a publication by the Royal College of Physicians, [Working the Night Shift](#), which it is strongly recommended that any healthcare professional regularly working night shifts reads. This also contains a summary of relevant evidence.

The Royal College of Nursing also supports these recommendations in their guidance on the occupational health and safety of shift work in the nursing workforce, [A Shift in the Right Direction](#).

Sleep on nightshift

One key recommendation is that, where possible, healthcare workers on night shifts should be encouraged to use their regular break/rest periods during long shifts to have short naps.

Even short naps, taken as part of a regular night shift routine, can have significant effects on improving levels of alertness and responsiveness, and are effective in minimising both the direct effect on staff's health of the consequences of working night shifts, but also to reduce risk to patients as a result of overtired professionals.

Statutory Breaks

New Deal arrangements (a contractual agreement between 'NHS Employers' and all Doctors in Training) for doctors working a full shift pattern expect that workers should have a minimum of 30 minutes of break/rest every four hours.

These breaks are not a luxury, especially when doing busy or intense night work. They are an essential part of ensuring that safe, effective patient care is delivered to the best of each member of staff's capability.

Unless there are critically ill patients requiring immediate attention, patients are always better served by healthcare professionals who have had appropriate periods of break and rest during a shift.

If you are consistently not getting recommended breaks within New Deal guidance, this needs to be urgently discussed with your educational supervisor.

Naps

There is good evidence that short (~20 minute) naps during night shifts can have significant positive benefits for many people, particularly when combined with a caffeine hit just as you start your nap – the caffeine takes 15-20 minutes to take effect, meaning it is just kicking in as you get to the end of your nap.

Longer sleeps are not better, as this will often result in you entering deeper stages of sleep which can be more difficult to quickly wake from and increase the chance of 'sleep inertia' - grogginess on waking.

Prolonged sleep during a single night may also affect your ability to sleep during the day, which is particularly relevant when doing consecutive night shifts. The right length of short nap is an individual thing, and it is worth doing some experimentation to find the best for you.

Not everyone is able to "power nap" in this fashion, in which case relaxation in a dark, quiet room may also be of some benefit.

Conclusion

While finding a pattern of wake and sleep in preparation for, while working, and recovering from night shift is a very individual process, we would encourage all healthcare professionals working night shifts to have access to basic information regarding sleep physiology and key advice and strategies to be able to make informed choices for themselves.

Even small improvements in these areas can have significant effects both for individuals' own health, but also to sustain and improve the high standard of care our patients deserve.

I am always happy to discuss issues relating to this with anyone working at Evelina London.

Dr Michael Farquhar
Consultant in Paediatric Sleep Medicine
June 2016