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Shift work and sleep

Shift workers really do get a raw deal when it comes to getting enough sleep. They have to try and sleep when the rest of the world is waking up and their body clocks have a hard time adjusting.

Short rotation shift workers are the worst affected. They have to change their sleeping patterns every few days. No sooner does the body's rhythm adapt than it's time to change it again.

I remember many years back I was boarding with a friend who was a shift worker. I used to envy him as I passed him on the stairs heading towards a comfy bed, while I was starting a new working day, tired from being awake some of the night (I suffered from insomnia back then)

Now when I think back, I realize how wrong I was. My friend was sleep deprived even when he managed to get 6 hours - which wasn't often. The sleep he was getting during the day just wasn't as restful. It would be like having permanent jet lag.

Shift work and health

Sleep deprived workers are less productive and more prone to accidents at work or while driving, they may suffer with indigestion a lot as the digestive system becomes sluggish at night. The effects of shift work becomes even harder to cope with as we get older, maybe because our bodies are less resilient.

Lack of restful sleep can also depress the immune system leaving the shift worker prone to more colds, flu and other health problems. And then there are the ever present social hassles. The shift worker has to sleep while their friends and family are awake.

So what's the best way of getting a good "day's" sleep when you're a shift worker? The main problem to overcome is the body's natural circadian rhythm. It is designed to make us sleepy as darkness falls and awake as daylight floods our bedrooms. So all our systems are trying to slow down while we're trying to get going.

Darkness stimulates the release of melatonin by the pineal gland. The production slows down as it becomes light. Melatonin encourages sleep and the lack of it can cause sleeplessness. This is known as the shift work sleep disorder

The following can help.

Invest in heavy blinds and curtains to keep light out of the bedroom

Buy a sleep mask and some ear plugs Turn off the phone or have it somewhere you won't be disturbed

Make sure your family and friends know not to disturb you during your sleep time Try melatonin half an hour before going to bed. This can help to reset your body rhythms. Start with 1 mg

Bright light therapy can also help reset the body's clock and regulate melatonin levels. Seek medical advice first.

The following are not recommended!

Drinking alcohol to help you sleep - have a drink by all means, just don't expect it to improve your sleep.

Sleeping pills - They're ok for a very temporary fix.

So try the above sleep tips and see if they help your problem. It may well be worth having a chat to your employer about a rest break a on the job. After all it will increase your productivity so you'll both benefit!

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