

# COVID-19 STAFF WELLBEING

Central Adelaide Local Health Network

## Management of Fatigue during COVID-19 Guidance for managers

### What is fatigue?

Fatigue is the decreased capability to perform mental or physical work, produced as a function of inadequate sleep, circadian disruption or time on task. It is an acute and/or ongoing state of tiredness that leads to mental, physical and emotional exhaustion. It is more than feeling tired and drowsy. It is a condition that can occur when an individual's physical, mental or emotional limits are exhausted.

Fatigue can be caused by factors which may be work-related, personal or a combination of both; and can accumulate over time. The amount and quality of sleep, work schedules, recovery times, dietary and physical activity habits all play a role in the ability to manage fatigue.

Health care workers are at particular risk of suffering fatigue during times of crisis such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. They continue to provide care despite increasingly challenging work demands presented by higher influx of critically ill patients, increased work stress, demand for challenging work schedules and overtime. Combined with insufficient sleep, these physical, emotional and mental demands contribute to fatigue.

### Why is fatigue management such a big deal?

Fatigued health workers put their own health and safety at risk through increased susceptibility to infectious diseases, needle stick injuries, musculoskeletal injuries and burnout. They also put the health and safety of their patients at risk through an increased risk of committing patient care errors.

### Who is responsible for managing fatigue?

Both workers and their managers share the responsibility to control the risks of injuries and incidents associated with fatigue through personal and workplace strategies.

### How can work schedules contribute to increased fatigue risk?

A varied work pattern, the number of hours worked in a shift or in a week, breaks, recovery times and hours away from work have the potential to raise the fatigue risk if not managed appropriately.

These factors include:

- Lack of days off each week (should have at least one full day off)
- Lack of night-time sleep (should have at least 2 consecutive night sleep opportunities per week)
- Working beyond usual shift length (over-time, double shifts) or any work beyond 12 consecutive hours
- Working more than 50 hours per week
- Having less than 10 hours break between consecutive shifts
- Shift commencement before 7am

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- More than 3-4 consecutive night shifts (should have at least 2 full nights' sleep after last night shift)
- More than 5-7 consecutive work days

Effective rostering and scheduling regimes will ensure optimum performance, effective completion of allocated tasks and reduced risk of errors.

## **What can I do if I am concerned that a worker is too tired to continue working?**

Watch for signs and symptoms of fatigue such as yawning, difficulty concentrating, emotional instability, flawed logic and poor communication.

Research tells us that tired workers are not good at judging their own fatigue levels. If you observe signs of fatigue in a worker, it is important to act immediately. One way to assess individual fatigue level is the [Fatigue Self-Assessment Tool \(FSAT\)](#)

For extended shifts or shift schedules with increased fatigue risk, consider checking worker FSAT scores hourly and modifying tasks if fatigued.

If you have appropriate facilities to enable this, you can also consider extending meal breaks to allow napping. Napping can help reduce sleep pressure and combat acute fatigue. However, be mindful of sleep inertia that follows. It is important to allow the worker a 30-40min break for napping to recover – 20min sleep with a 15min period to regain alertness and wakefulness. Please ensure workers who would like to nap are aware of this and schedule their naps accordingly.

Other things to consider:

- Negotiating a shift swap to avoid working while fatigued
- Postponing the shift start time to allow time to sleep / nap
- Arranging / allocating work tasks to reduce the job demands (avoid tasks that require high concentration / quick thinking, fast actions, fine hand-eye coordination)
- Arranging increased supervision / checking of important decisions from supervisor / colleague

## **What can I do to minimise the risk of fatigue related errors?**

- Where possible, schedule safety-critical roles/tasks outside of circadian rhythm low periods (i.e. avoid 2 - 6am and 2 - 4pm). In addition, where possible work demands should be decreased towards the end of the shift as much as practicable.
- Consider implementing procedures to have high consequence tasks checked to reduce the risks of decision-making errors when fatigued.
- Ensure workers have regular, preferably flexible, breaks so they can rest, eat and rehydrate.
- Introduce regular job/task rotation to limit a build-up of fatigue and to provide restorative task breaks.

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## What do I need to consider when designing rosters?

- Although it can be very challenging, rosters should be designed in such a way that allow workers adequate recovery time between shifts, opportunity for good quality of sleep, and time for travelling, eating, washing and personal commitments.
- Where possible, ensure a forward roster rotation system (morning / afternoon/night). Avoid quick shift changeovers, such as finishing at 11pm and starting again at 7am. Maximise breaks between shifts and before rotating staff to a new shift.
- Allocate shift workers consecutive days off where possible.
- Keep sequential night shifts to a minimum (no more than 4 nights in a row). Ensure that rosters allow for at least two full nights' sleep after the last night shift.
- Except for emergencies, attempt to give at least 24 hours notice before night work.
- Minimise night work for workers returning from leave to allow them time to adapt.
- Control overtime, shift swapping and on-call duties. Limit shift hours to 12 hours including overtime.
- When split shifts are required, consider timing of them to minimise sleep disruption. Avoid split shifts that involve early morning work and late night work as they affect the amount of night sleep.
- Avoid overtime allocation following afternoon or night shifts (particularly after 10 or 12 hour night shifts)
- Offer alternatives to workers who may have difficulties adjusting to working hours, for example consider accommodating morning versus evening people.
- Pay attention to the right mix of skills and experience of workers on each shift to maximize worker support and ensure a senior staff member with the appropriate skill backup is rostered on each shift
- Confirm that the number of shifts worked does not exceed the maximum award allowance in total. Ensure staff maintain appropriate working hours and breaks.

## What else can I do to support my staff through this challenging time?

Regular open communication with staff is key. Whether staff are working on the front line or from home, timely sharing of relevant information and checking in is vital in managing stress and fatigue. Use existing communication forums such as meetings, handover, email, phone or teleconferencing to stay in touch. Refer those affected to appropriate workplace mental health and wellbeing supports, such as Employee Assistance Programs and the [Wellbeing section of the COVID 19 webpage](#).

Your own personal resources are likely to be stretched. Consider providing workers with a point of contact to discuss their concerns and to find workplace information in a central place. Don't forget to take care of your own health and wellbeing amongst all that, too!

Further, allow workers to exercise the right to remove themselves from a work situation that they have reasonable justification to believe presents an imminent and serious danger to their life or health; and protect them from undue consequences if they exercise this right.

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Create a blame-free environment for workers to report hazards including blood or bodily fluid exposure (BBFE), when they are too tired to perform work and incidents of aggression / violence.

Inform workers of their responsibilities if they become unwell.

Inform workers about their entitlements if they become unfit for work or have caring responsibilities.

Continually provide formal and informal methods of feedback on performance that is frequent and constructive.

Remember to recognise and praise good work.

Utilise your mental health first aider or nominate someone in your team to play a role in helping to lift up the team.

Don't forget to look after yourself and manage your own fatigue levels. More information on some personal strategies to consider, refer to [FAQs for workers](#).

## **How can I learn more?**

Try the [eLearning Module for Prevention of Fatigue](#) or refer to the SA Health Prevention of Fatigue Resources found [here](#)