

COVID-19 STAFF WELLBEING

Central Adelaide Local Health Network

Management of Fatigue during COVID-19 Guidance for workers

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 two 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

How do I know if I am too tired to work?

Watch for signs and symptoms of fatigue in yourself and your colleagues. These include yawning, difficulty concentrating, emotional instability, flawed logic and poor communication.

Research tells us that when we are tired, our judgment is impaired to such an extent that it is difficult to recognise signs of fatigue. One way to assess your own individual fatigue level is by using the [Fatigue Self-Assessment Tool \(FSAT\)](#). It will also help you work out what you need to do. If you are fatigued and continued work is essential, discuss this with your supervisor and determine appropriate task mix for continued work while fatigued. For extended shifts or shift schedules with increased fatigue risk, consider checking your FSAT scores hourly.

Some things to discuss with your manager are:

- Swapping shifts to avoid working while fatigued
- Postponing 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 decrease your work demands towards the end of the shift as much as practicable.
- To reduce the risks of errors when fatigued, consider asking your colleagues / supervisor to check your decision-making where there is a risk of negative consequences.
- Ensure you have regular breaks so you can rest, eat and rehydrate.
- Regularly rotate jobs/tasks to limit a build-up of fatigue and to provide restorative task breaks.

Is napping a good idea?

Napping can help reduce sleep pressure and combat acute fatigue. However, be mindful of sleep inertia that follows. It is important to allow a 30-40min break for napping to recover – 20min sleep with a 15min period to regain alertness and wakefulness. Coffee drunk just prior to your nap takes time to take effect and therefore will not affect your ability to nap and instead it is likely to help reduce the impact of sleep inertia.

If you think napping is something that might assist you, discuss this with your manager.

What else can I do to combat fatigue?

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- Avoid eating large meals and eat as early in the night as possible.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Make time for sleep. Aim for 7-8 hours in every 24-hour period. Sleep can be planned as either one or more blocks to fit into your schedule, taking into consideration opportunities for preparatory and recovery sleep. Remember that both the QUANTITY and the QUALITY of sleep matter. If you have trouble falling asleep, use relaxation apps or techniques to aid sleep onset and create a pre-sleep bedtime routine. Keep your environment comfortable, dark, cool and quiet.
- Prepare for starting night shifts. There is an increased safety risk when you have been awake for >12 – 16 hours, so planning a sleep / nap prior to commencing night shifts is important. Aim to finish your sleep / nap time so that it will be less than 12 – 16 hours before you will be back at home after completing your shift. Similarly, plan your recovery sleep after a night shift, keeping in mind your normal sleep requirements and your next planned shift.
- Limit coffee intake to a maximum of 3 per day (>400mg caffeine/day, that is 4-5 cups, has been associated with negative health outcomes). Avoid coffee close to bedtime (minimum 5 hours depending on your sensitivity to caffeine) as it can disrupt your sleep.
- Avoid alcohol, spicy foods and nicotine for at least 2-3 hours prior to sleep.
- Avoid sunlight / bright lights 1.5 hours prior to sleep, as it can promote wakefulness through the effect on your internal body clock (circadian rhythm)
- Ensure you maintain a work life balance.
- Engage in regular exercise, but avoid high intensity exercise close to bed time as it may interfere with sleep.
- Always ensure safety for driving. Take a nap for driving home if tired and pull-over to nap if you become too tired to continue driving.
- Support your colleagues who have become self-aware of symptoms of fatigue while at work.

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](#)