

# Life Lines

Improving Your Quality of Life — One Step at a Time



## Managing Shift Work

*If you work in policing, health care, transportation, hospitality or other industries that require staff 24 hours a day, seven days a week, shift work is probably a fact of life. While some people like working evenings or nights because it allows time for childcare or daytime activities, many more find shift work wreaks havoc on their personal lives — and health.*

Working shifts is hard on individuals and their families. Planning social engagements or meeting family obligations is difficult when your work schedule is the opposite of everyone else's. Then there's the issue of sleep. Getting up when your family is about to retire for the night and trying to sleep when the sun is shining and the children are playing can mean a constant state of exhaustion — which makes you cranky and hard to live with. At work, lack of sleep can mean poor productivity and an increased risk of accidents.

### Shift work and your health

Shift work is not only hard on your relationships and work performance; it can also have a negative effect on your health. Various studies, including a 2007 report by the World Health Organization, shows that shift work can increase the risk of developing certain cancers, primarily breast and prostate cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular problems. In 2012, a team of researchers from Canada, Sweden and Norway found that shift workers had an increased risk (23%) for a heart attack compared to day workers.

### Upsetting the balance

Why is this? It's because shift work disrupts our internal "clock" that operates on a 24-hour cycle. This "clock" tells us when to eat, wake up and go to sleep. It also regulates digestion, the secretion of hormones, body temperature and blood pressure.






Many factors affect our body clock, including light and lack of light. When night approaches our body usually signals that it's time for sleep. When the sun rises, our internal clock cues us to wake up. When this timing is thrown off balance, so are our sleeping and eating patterns. Anyone who has flown across time zones has experienced this biological confusion. It's called jet lag.

Shift work causes the same confusion in your body. You're off to work instead of going to bed and going to bed when most of your community is waking up. After a few days, your body clock adjusts to the upside-down schedule, only to be thrown into confusion once again when your shift changes and you're back on days. Your body doesn't know when to wake and when to sleep.





### Coping with shift work

Shift work may be tough, but there are definitely things you can do to make its effects much less stressful for you and your family. The most important thing is to create as much predictability and balance in your schedule as possible through new lifestyle rituals, so that the only "shift" you need to deal with are those related to your work hours. The following are some helpful tips.

## At home:

-  **Keep your bedroom cool, dark and quiet when you need to sleep.** Light blocking shades can be helpful and carpeting and drapes can help dampen sound. Tell friends and neighbours when not to call and turn off your cell phone.
-  **Experiment with different bedtimes to see what works best for you.** It's a good idea to go to bed as early as possible after the night shift in order to maximize sleep. A second sleep could also be taken in the afternoon to get ready for your overnight shift.
-  **Wind down with a bedtime ritual.** For example, take a warm bath before retiring to signal your brain that it's time for sleep. Make sure your body associates bed with sleep by not reading, watching TV or playing video games in bed. Try as much as possible to keep the same bedtime throughout the week, including days when you're not working.
-  **Don't eat a heavy meal before going to bed and avoid caffeine and alcohol for at least five hours before you try to sleep.** Avoid fatty meals — especially in the middle of the night because they are difficult to digest at that time and might cause an upset stomach.
-  **Exercise.** Regular exercise helps you cope with stress and gives you more energy. Given the challenge of figuring out when to do this, try to exercise whenever it is most likely for you to maintain regularity of exercise. This does not have to be formal exercise at a gym; walking, biking, jogging, or swimming are all great.

## At work:

-  **Staying awake and alert on the overnight shift can be challenging.** However, short breaks can help maintain alertness. When you start feeling sleepy — yawning, eyes closing and head bobbing — take a break, move around, or increase your level of stimulation.
-  **Limit caffeine intake.** Caffeine should be used sparingly and only in the early part of the shift.
-  **Avoid keeping the most boring work for last** when you are the most tired.
-  **Avoid bright light.** When driving home in the morning, wear dark sunglasses to prevent exposure to bright light. Bright light affects your body clock and will make it more difficult to fall asleep when you get home.

If you find it difficult adjusting to, or coping with shift work, talk to your doctor or contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program. They can help you find appropriate solutions.

LL\_V\_EN\_V3\_10

We want your questions,  
comments, and suggestions.  
lifelines@  
homewoodhumansolutions.com

For more information, to book a counselling session, or to access any of your EFAP services our Client Services Representatives are ready to speak with you 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in English or French. All calls are completely confidential.

1.800.663.1142

1.866.398.9505 (Numéro sans frais - en français)

1.888.384.1152 (TTY)

604.689.1717 International (Call Collect)

[www.homewoodhumansolutions.com](http://www.homewoodhumansolutions.com)

 **Homewood** | **Human Solutions Humaines**