

SHIFTING THE RISK: MANAGING HEALTH AND OTHER RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH SHIFT WORK

September 2017

A PROACTIVE APPROACH

We have the following advice for employers:

- Employers need to take a proactive approach in addressing these health issues and concerns.
- Risks should be considered and any reasonable actions should be taken to ensure that the risks are managed appropriately.

Factors to consider during risk assessment are:

- Workload.
- Work activity.
- Shift timing and duration.
- Whether it is better for the shifts to run in a 'forward rotation', i.e. morning/afternoon/night.
- The number and length of breaks within a shift.
- Rest periods between shifts.

As part of good practice, we recommend that employers:

- Discuss shift patterns (including length, start time, rotation, rest periods, work to be completed) and health and safety concerns with employees on a regular basis. Employers are required to consider the suggestions made by employees when making decisions about shift work (Safety Representatives & Safety Committees Regulations 1977 and Health & Safety (Consultation with employees) Regulations 1996).
- Offer a choice of regular or rotating shifts and try to avoid permanent night shifts.



- Rotate shifts every two to three days (fast rotating shifts allow sleep loss to be easily recovered) or every three to four weeks – otherwise adopt forward rotating shifts. Leading sleep expert, Professor Jim Horne, states that biological adaptation to significant change in sleep patterns can take five to seven days and this should be borne in mind when planning shift rotations which have been in place for a period of time.
- Avoid split shifts if at all possible.
- Assess individual employees' ability to cope with shift pattern changes, or night shift working. Where an employee is not able to cope adequately with their allocated shifts, attempt to alter their shift pattern or workload in order to reduce risk.
- Plan the workload to ensure that the employees have an appropriate level of work that does not rely on them working to pressured targets.
- Try to have a varied task list and ensure that higher risk and monotonous work is completed when accidents are less prevalent (ie not during night-time hours) and that there is a mix of mentally and physically challenging tasks to promote alertness and relieve physical fatigue. Allow employees some flexibility about in which order tasks are completed.
- Provide employees with training and information about risks associated with shift working, whilst making staff aware of support services available (childcare, counselling, health assessments etc) to them.
- Limit consecutive workdays with a shift pattern of seven to eight hours to a maximum of five to seven days, with at least 11 hours rest between shifts.
- Restrict long shifts, night shifts and early morning shifts to two to three- consecutive shifts, followed by two to three days' rest.
- Where possible, regular weekend breaks should be included to motivate and promote wellbeing and domestic activities.
- Avoid early morning shift starts (before 7am) – if business needs allow – as these can increase fatigue.
- Limit shifts to eight hours if they are night shifts and/or the work is demanding, monotonous, dangerous and/or safety critical. This ensures compliance with the Working Time Regulations 1998, Regulation 6. Longer shifts increase the risk of fatigue.
- The Working Time Regulations 1998, Regulation 7, state that night workers are entitled to a free health assessment before being assigned to night work and regular health assessments after that. Additional appropriate occupational health screening will quickly determine whether a particular individual is suited to working night shifts and will limit health issues arising down the line.
- If workers will be driving for work or will be involved in a safety critical role, we recommend that a full health assessment – including a psychological assessment – is conducted and not just offered, to ensure that the employee is fit for that role. These should be renewed on a regular basis to ensure that the employee continues to be fit to undertake that role.
- Try to avoid requiring employees to drive for work during the hours of 2am and 6am when the body is in sleep mode and also between 2pm and 4pm, particularly after a large lunchtime meal.
- Encourage regular breaks at a time of the employee's choosing, but discourage saving break times until the end of the shift in order to leave earlier.
- Consider the additional needs of vulnerable workers (young/aging workers/new or expectant mothers) and vary their workload or shift pattern accordingly if possible.
- Ensure night workers have the same benefits/facilities as those who work during the day, such as access to a canteen, first aid, occupational health services, IT, training etc.
- Promote healthy living activities in the workforce, including mental wellbeing, diet and exercise.
- Ensure that the temperature of the workplace is appropriate during all shifts.
- Ensure that the premises are well lit, safe and secure to ensure that employees are free from the threat of violence.
- Avoid overtime – particularly after long shifts – by ensuring that there is adequate staffing levels. Overtime can lead to increased fatigue.
- Shift swapping between employees should be monitored to ensure that employees have sufficient rest breaks between shifts.
- Encourage team working and interaction between team members to increase alertness, reduce risk of accidents and reduce isolation. This should also include team working between shift handovers.
- Check and review your shift work patterns and risks regularly and provide a system for feedback and comments from your employees.

FURTHER INFORMATION

To find out more about our services and expertise, and key contacts, go to: [kennedyslaw.com](https://www.kennedyslaw.com)

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