

August 2021

## Managing the risks of shift work

Shift work can expose workers to different health and safety risks, especially fatigue. This information will help you reduce the health and safety risks to workers carrying out shift work.

This information is a summary of key points outlined in our good practice guidelines: [Managing the risks of shift work](#)



### What is shift work?

Shift work is any type of work that requires a worker to be awake when they would normally be asleep.

Shift work might involve:

- permanent, rotating, changeable, non-standard, irregular, or unpredictable work hours
- early starts
- late finishes
- night work.

Long hours that span the traditional workday can also be classed as shift work. For example, when they include early starts and/or late finishes that require a worker to be awake when they would normally be asleep.

Shift workers in small businesses may work in industries such as construction, fishing, trade, hospitality, and farming.



### What causes fatigue?

Shift work causes fatigue.

Fatigue is a physiological state where someone is unable to mentally and physically function at their best.

Fatigue is caused by four main things:

- missing out on sleep
- being awake for too long
- working and sleeping in the wrong parts of the body clock cycle, and
- workload (physical and mental).



### What are the effects of fatigue and shift work?

Together, shift work and fatigue contribute to:

- poorer mental and physical health
- lower level of functioning
- increased risk of accident or injury
- increased turnover and sick leave absence.

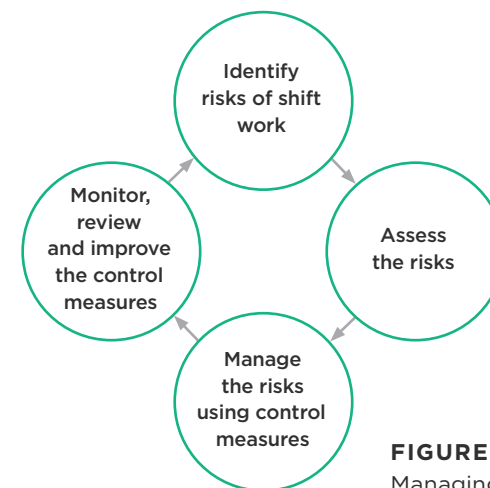
Shift work may also increase the likelihood of mental health problems such as depression and psychological distress.

## How can you manage risks?

You must eliminate risks so far as is reasonably practicable. If not reasonably practicable to eliminate risk, you must minimise risks, so far as is reasonably practicable. When you are minimising risks, the control measures will depend on the risks of the work, the work culture and environment, the type and structure of your business, and your workers.

Put robust fatigue risk management processes in place. These processes should support you to identify, assess and manage the risks of shift work, as well as to monitor, review and improve control measures (Figure 1).

For more information on managing work risks, see our guidance: [How to manage work risks](#)



**FIGURE 1:**  
Managing risk

## Effectively manage the risks from shift work

There are many different work schedules, and each one carries its own risks. There is no perfect schedule. The table below outlines a few things to consider when designing rosters and shift work.

DEMANDS OF THE ROLE	WORK ACTIVITY	SHIFT PATTERN	SHIFT TIMING	SHIFT DURATION	REST BREAKS
<p>Workers with a balanced workload will be more efficient, effective and less fatigued than those who are overloaded or underloaded.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Schedule demanding work for times when workers are most alert and least likely to be fatigued.</li> <li>- Think about the physical nature of the work, repetitive activity, cognitive demands, isolated workers, environmental factors, and training.</li> </ul>	<p>Rotating sedentary mental tasks with physical tasks can help temporarily reduce the effects of fatigue during a shift.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Schedule a variety of tasks into the shift work roster, where reasonably practicable.</li> <li>- Allow workers to have some choice over their work activities and the order in which they are carried out.</li> </ul>	<p>Some workers may prefer regular permanent shifts, while others may prefer rotating shifts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Avoid scheduling permanent night shifts if reasonably practicable.</li> <li>- Roster shifts to be forward-rotating where reasonably practicable.</li> <li>- Include some weekends in recovery sleep opportunities.</li> </ul>	<p>Night shifts are disruptive. They cause sleep loss, lighter sleep during the day, and mean that people are working at less functional times.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consider the risks of working night shifts. Consider the likelihood that a worker will be fatigued, as well as the risks of fatigued workers doing different tasks throughout the night.</li> <li>- Schedule daytime shifts rather than night or early morning shifts, where reasonably practicable.</li> </ul>	<p>The longer the shift, the greater the likelihood of fatigue.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Schedule shifts no longer than 8 hours when the work is monotonous, mentally or physically demanding, or isolated.</li> <li>- Carefully monitor overtime and unplanned shift extensions.</li> <li>- Make arrangements to cover absentees.</li> </ul>	<p>Frequent short breaks can reduce fatigue, improve productivity and may reduce the likelihood of incidents.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Encourage workers to take frequent and regular breaks.</li> <li>- Give workers enough time between shifts to recover from the work.</li> </ul>

**TABLE 1:** Things to consider when designing rosters and shift work

## Additional control measures

The shift roster has a big impact on how workers are affected by their work and working hours. However, smart rostering/shift work design, by itself, will not prevent fatigue and other shift work-related risks. Other control measures will also be needed to effectively manage risks.

Alongside the smart rostering approach:

- have clear policies and procedures around shift work
- make sure workers know what to do if there is a problem
- have effective and ongoing ways for reporting fatigue
- have effective and ongoing ways for communication.

Regularly review the control measures you have in place, and keep track of incident reporting, injuries, and reports from Health and Safety Representatives or other worker representatives.

## Napping at work

Napping at work is an effective strategy for temporarily reducing the effects of fatigue, including before driving home from work. However, napping should not be used as a routine strategy for extending shifts, and it requires policy and procedures around its use.

For more information about napping at work, see our guidance: [Managing the risks of shift work](#)

For more information about risks for driving while fatigued, see the [Waka Kotahi](#) website.

## Worker engagement, participation, and representation

You must engage with your workers and enable them to participate in improving health and safety. People who carry out the work usually have the best insight into the work risks present. Involve your workers when creating and rolling out fatigue risk management processes.

For more information on worker engagement, participation, and representation, see our website: [Good practice for worker engagement, participation, and representation](#)