Beware of Lulls in Your Alertness Levels

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

If there are certain times of day when you are fighting the urge to sleep, you aren't imagining things. Any night shift worker will tell you that the urge to sleep is strong between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. What you might not know is that another lull occurs in the early-to-mid afternoon.

Lulls in circadian rhythms occur in people who have had sufficient sleep before coming to work. Obviously, someone who is sleep-deprived has an even greater chance of falling into an unintended sleep.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

The desire to sleep can be so powerful that you can drift into what is called a microsleep without warning. If you are behind the wheel or operating dangerous equipment, a microsleep can turn into an unintentional permanent one.

Example

A National Sleep Foundation poll found that about one in two drivers reported driving a vehicle in the past year while fighting the urge to sleep and nearly 20 percent of the respondents admitted to having fallen asleep at the wheel.

While some sort of transportation accident, be it a plane crash or car wreck, seems to be the most dramatic example of a hazard related to a lull in circadian rhythms, there are many other job-related hazards. A sleepy nurse may administer the wrong drug or the wrong dosage of a drug or a security person may fall asleep in front of a monitor and not see a break-in unfolding.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

One way of boosting alertness and increasing productivity is to have a 20-minute nap break. Many companies now offer their night shift workers this opportunity. If your employer does, you should take advantage of it.

As well, these tips can help you stay awake and alert through circadian lulls, whether at night or in the afternoon:

- Start your morning with a good breakfast and eat a snack two to three hours later to help stabilize blood sugar levels. Skipping breakfast can make an energy slump worse.
- Avoid large, high-fat meals, which bring on the urge to sleep. Also avoid eating sugary junk food, which can give you a temporary boost and then zap your energy half an hour later.
- Drink a glass of water periodically to stay well hydrated.
- A cup of coffee can help make you more alert during a lull period.
- If you have an afternoon break, don’t sit around. Taking a brisk walk will increase your alertness and energy level.
- If you have control over the temperature of your workplace, set it slightly lower. A temperature of 65-68 degrees Fahrenheit (18-20 degrees Celsius) boosts alertness.
- If you’re exhausted after finishing a night shift, take a nap in a break room or in your vehicle before driving home. Otherwise you’ll be at high risk for falling asleep behind the wheel on the way home.
- Try to get at least seven hours of sleep every day. If you awaken tired after seven to eight hours of sleep, you may have obstructive sleep apnea. Talk to your doctor.

FINAL WORD

One European study showed that 85 percent of control room operators in an oil refinery admitted to falling asleep at least once during a 16-hour period. That’s nothing to yawn at. Fatigue can lead to mistakes on the job. And those mistakes can lead to

injuries and fatalities. Protect yourself and your co-workers by making it a priority to get adequate sleep before each shift.