Shiftwork Safety Talk

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

A lot of people think of "work hours" as the daylight hours from 8 or so in the morning until 5 or so in the afternoon. But For many people, their workday either starts in the afternoon and ends late at night, or begins around midnight and ends in the early morning. Be aware that your safety is just as critical as the day crew, but that conditions and hazards may be different.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

CIRCADIAN CLOCK

For employees who work rotating or night shifts, remaining alert can be especially challenging when the body's clock is compromised – that is, the body is active when it believes it should be resting.

The Impact of Shiftwork on Safety & Company Performance

Shiftworkers face considerable challenges. Their morale is often low. Their family and social lives may suffer because of their irregular hours, which contributes to their stress. The quantity and quality of shift workers' sleep is also typically low. So it's no surprise that sleep disorders, such as obstructive sleep apnea, are commonplace among shiftworkers. Shiftwork has also been associated with an increased risk of:

- Cardiovascular disease;
- Gastrointestinal disorders;
- Obesity; and
- Diabetes.

The increased prevalence of such health problems often results in shiftworkers' increased use of medication, which can adversely affect their job performance.

CHALLENGES / DANGERS ASSOCIATED WITH SHIFTWORK

The potential for accidents and injuries tends to be significantly higher on night shifts than during the day.

- The type of work may be different. Some companies schedule inherently heavy or more hazardous work at night when fewer people are around. This reduces the risk for the many, but not necessarily for those on a graveyard or swing shift.
- It’s more difficult to see in the dark. Artificial light can’t illuminate every surface, which can result in more trips and falls. This also makes night driving more hazardous.
- Shift work may result in psychological problems for shift workers who fail to eat, rest and sleep adequately. Research indicates that shift workers may suffer depression, increased alcohol use, and even symptoms of physical illness.
- The potential for criminal behavior may increase the need for security by both the company and employees, since the cover of darkness is often used to help people commit crimes.
- Night workers who lack seniority for day shift assignments may be less experienced and less aware of safe work practices. This can make them more hazardous to themselves and others.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

FATIGUE PREVENTION

Shiftwork and shift workers are necessary and instrumental in keeping so many vital operations goings 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This could mean working nights or alternating days, nights and afternoons, or other irregular shifts.

Shift work comes with inherent risks/dangers. The following are safety practices to assist in mitigating the dangers of shift work.

Require Daytime Managers to Periodically Work at Night

Managers who've experienced the challenges of working at 4 A.M. are more likely to think of practical ways to improve the safety and wellness of their shift workers than managers who've never experienced a night shift.

Evaluate your Work Environment

Conduct a comprehensive review of your workplace to identify factors that contribute to fatigue – such as dim lighting, poor airflow, and warm temperatures (i.e. over 70 degrees).

Put Shiftwork Safety on the Agenda

Make sure that overnight safety is a mandated discussion point at safety committee meetings and that night workers have a seat at the table.

Teach Workers about Sleep and Napping

Getting enough off-duty sleep is the most effective way to maintain alertness. You can't force workers to sleep, but you can ensure that they are given sufficient shiftwork lifestyle training to educate them on the fundamental importance of sleep, getting quality daytime sleep, and making the most of pre-work naps.

Permit Several Short Breaks

Many shiftwork jobs involve doing the same task for long stretches of time. This monotony can induce microsleeps and other lapses in alertness – especially on the night shift. In addition to a 25- to 35-minute break per shift, workers on the night shift benefit from a 10- to 15-minute break every two or three hours.

Assess your Schedule

No shiftwork schedule is perfect, but some are particularly difficult. Schedules that require workers to rotate backward (i.e., to go from nights to evenings to days) or work five or more consecutive 12-hour shifts can exacerbate fatigue levels.

Monitor Overtime

People are more likely to make mistakes when they've accumulated a sleep debt from several days of insufficient sleep – which may result from excess overtime. Keep an eye on overall overtime levels (including a breakdown of day vs. night OT hours) and identify individual "overtime hogs" who accrue large amounts of extra work hours.

Standardize Shift Change Procedures

A large proportion of accidents occur during shift changes because of the additional movement around the plant and the increased need for communication among workers. Make sure you have procedures in place that ensure a smooth transition between shifts.

Watch Out For "The Wall"

Due to the dip in circadian rhythms, the hours between 4 and 6 A.M. are generally the hardest – and riskiest – hours of the night shift to work. Exercise has been shown to boost alertness, making an exercise bike or treadmill available for interested workers may minimize the risk of "hitting the wall".

Don't Forget the Drive Home

Due to the increased risk of falling asleep at the wheel, the post-shift commute home is often a dangerous part of a shift worker's day. Provide workers with a quiet room to nap in before heading home.

Provide Shiftwork Lifestyle Training

Whether it's handing out relevant literature, providing training online, or holding in-person seminars – it's always a wise idea to educate workers on the health and safety challenges of shiftwork. Providing shiftwork lifestyle training is also a great way to show workers that you recognize the unique challenges they face – which can improve employee morale.

FINAL WORD

Studies show that if a company can improve the quality of life of its shiftworkers and help them better manage the challenges posed by shiftwork, it can reduce absenteeism, turnover, safety incidents and workers’ compensation claims. Management that invests in a lifestyle training program for shiftwork will pay off in big dividends for all in the future.