



# SHIFTWORK SECRETS



Shiftwork

How to Balance Your Life, On and Off the Clock

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## Are You Sleeping? Body Clock Basics

**Y**our body has an internal 24-hour clock that regulates many of its important functions, such as blood pressure, hormone levels, digestion, temperature and sleep. This 24-hour pattern is called a circadian rhythm.

When your job requires you to work unconventional hours, circadian rhythms can be disrupted. This can cause sleep problems, digestive disorders, even heart problems. Fortunately, you can do something about it.

### WORKING WITH YOUR CIRCADIAN RHYTHMS

Everyone's circadian rhythm is slightly different. You can't change your circadian rhythm, but you can try to "trick" your body into being more awake at night and more relaxed and sleepy during daylight hours. *Try these:*

**Sleep in the dark.** Studies have shown that circadian rhythms are partly regulated by light exposure. Darkening your bedroom with light-blocking shades or even a heavy blanket tacked over the windows can help your body think it's time for sleep even though the sun is shining.

**Expose yourself to light.** Get as much bright light as you can both at home before you start your shift and during your night shift at work. You might even want to talk to your doctor about using a "light box," a device that simulates natural light and can help regulate circadian rhythms.

**Take care of yourself.** Don't ignore signs that won't go away, such as sleep trouble, depression or persistent indigestion. Shiftwork can put extra stress on your body, but there are ways to cope with it and meet the challenge. Talk with your doctor about your concerns. ♦



### SHIFTWORK TIP #1

**Coping With Change**  
It takes 12 days for your body to adjust to a new schedule. Devising coping strategies to make those days as easy as possible can help boost both your productivity and your well-being. (This booklet will show you how.)

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR BODY CLOCK

Your body's circadian rhythm causes hormone production, body temperature, digestion and other functions to change during the nighttime hours. This rhythm dictates that you should be awake during the day and asleep at night. Changing this natural rhythm due to shiftwork can cause some strange physical effects.

**Chilliness.** Many shiftworkers report feeling cold on the night shift, even though their workplace temperature stays steady. That's because your body temperature drops starting between 11 p.m. and midnight, reaching its lowest point between 4 a.m. and 5 a.m. **Action:** Wear layered clothing so you can cope with body temperature shifts.

**Hallucinations.** Your body's temperature drop can bring about strange symptoms, such as peripheral hallucinations — seeing objects out of the corner of your eye that aren't really there. **Action:** Make sure you give everything, including your work, a second glance. Take an exercise or snack break and rest your

eyes around 4 a.m., especially if you're driving.

**Feeling stuck.** As your body gets colder, you may feel sluggish or even paralyzed as the night goes on. Reaction time is slowed and accidents are more likely.

**Action:** Perform complex tasks early in your shift while you are warmest and most alert. Take safety precautions and allow extra time for tasks you must perform during the wee hours.

**The bottom line:** Your body's circadian rhythm adjusts only if you keep the same wake/sleep schedule permanently, even on days off. Since this isn't realistic for most workers, your best bet is to be aware of your body's rhythms and learn to make the most of them. ♦

## FALLING ASLEEP, STAYING ASLEEP

Do you find yourself falling asleep easily, only to wake up a couple of hours later? This phenomenon is called sleep maintenance insomnia, and it is characterized by waking up for a half-hour or more during a sleep session.

## What Causes Insomnia?

Shiftworkers are especially at risk for sleep maintenance insomnia because they often sleep during the daytime, when the body's circadian rhythms dictate being awake. Other causes of sleep maintenance insomnia include the following:

- Chronic pain
- Restless legs syndrome (a medical problem that causes an uncomfortable "crawling" sensation in the legs)
- Stress
- Caffeine or alcohol consumption
- Depression
- Menopause

## What to Do

*Use these strategies to help improve sleep:*

- Always go to bed and wake up at the same times, even on your days off.
- Start adjusting your sleep schedule gradually a week before a shift change.
- Exercise for 30 minutes three to four times per week, at least four hours before going to bed.
- Eat a snack before bed that includes both a carbohydrate (example: whole-grain bread) and a protein (example: almond butter or sliced turkey).
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine before going to bed.
- If you wake up, get out of bed and do a relaxing activity until you feel sleepy again.

**Don't suffer alone:** If you have insomnia regularly, talk to your doctor. Insomnia can be treated, and it is important to find out if your sleep problems are caused by an underlying medical condition. ♦

## SHIFTWORK TIP #2

**Are You a Lark or an Owl?** An owl is someone who is most awake late at night (11 p.m.-3 a.m.) and prefers to sleep later in the morning. A lark would rather go to sleep earlier (9 p.m.-11 p.m.) and feels at his or her best at the crack of dawn.



Knowing whether you're a lark or an owl can help you plan your day. For example, larks are better off getting to bed early and rising early to fit in last-minute projects, rather than pulling all-nighters to finish tasks. Owls tend to have more flexible internal clocks and can adjust to changes in sleep and work schedules more easily.