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# All I Do is Sleep and Work

Doctors and researchers are interested in what happens to people who work “nonstandard” shifts. Non-standard includes night shifts but also evening shifts, duty of 12 hours or more, compressed weeks, early morning shifts, weekend work, split shifts and more. Did you know that the work hours for more than half the workers in America qualify as nonstandard? Did you know it might not be good for you unless you take precautions? Here’s what you need to know.

For one thing nonstandard work may be unavoidable. Economic pressure (like the oil patch), the demands of health care, police or fire protection and the demand that everybody has for the convenience to shop, be entertained or eat at any hour make it so. Some of us will just have to do that kind of work. If you need a job but the only thing available is 12 hour graveyard then that is what you do.

Our body however doesn’t like it. The animal part of our brain wants us to sleep at night and be up in the day. It’s a circadian (it means “about a day”) rhythm. We are built for a 24 hour day -it’s physiological. All kinds of things go wrong when you don’t listen to Mother Nature. Working nights flips your natural clock upside down. Just when you get up is when the brain is signaling that it’s time to slow down. Then the next morning as your brain wants to gear up in response to day light is when you try to sleep. This is a tremendous stress on the hormones that control nearly all our body functions. The word hormone simply means chemicals present in the body in minute amounts but with massive effects. There are dozens of them. Altered patterns of sleep make us feel fatigue or insomnia. We are less agile in our thinking. Our work effort is poorer. We feel digestive upset. And that is just for starters. Most people that try to sleep in the day compete with daytime noise and light so the sleep is poorer. Sleep studies show daytime sleep is a poorer quality sleep even when it’s dark and quiet. People working nights don’t interact with family as well and so feel stress from that.

Depending which study you look at equipment operator accidents go up 15 % for evening workers and 30 % on the night shift compared to straight day work. Operators of equipment on night shifts as a whole have been shown to not perceive risk as well and make poorer choices to avoid accidents. If you work 12 hour shifts (day or night) the incident of accidents can be double in the last 4 hours compared to the first 8 hours. It is not just “I didn’t sleep well” either. 10% of night or rotating shift workers have a definable illness called shift-work sleep disorder. When you bundle together poor sleep, poor diet, contrary hormones and the stress that comes from it you get other medical problems, too. The poor diet and stress increases cholesterol and thereby the risk of heart disease. Obesity is increased for people who do nonstandard shift work. If you smoke you’ll probably smoke more on a night shift.

So what do you do about this? Well, first be reasonable. Some people tolerate nonstandard shifts just fine. They excel at their work and the work stress is moderate. They have supportive co-workers and family; they get good rest and go on to long happy lives. Plan time to rest and eat correctly during the shift and also to rest sufficiently when off. Keep stress at work and at home under control as you can and watch that you don’t use coffee, energy drinks, alcohol or drugs as a necessity. If you start or stop medicines that might affect sleep, wakefulness or mood you should be extra attentive for several weeks to judge the effect. Pay attention to your gut. Our gut can sometimes be a sensitive indicator of our overall health-both physical and mental.



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