

Sleep Times



Did You Know

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Message from the President

This month's newsletter is a follow-up to our September, 2006 issue. It contains the most recent information about worker fatigue and related corporate costs. The two articles in this newsletter focus on the corporate costs of fatigue, and the challenges and solutions related to fatigued employees, especially those working non-traditional hours.

Sincerely,
Mary O'Sullivan
President

Fatigue in the Workplace: Common and Costly

Studies show that fatigue in the workplace increases the risk of injury and impedes productivity among workers. A recent study concerning fatigue has been published in the January 2007, *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*. The study's objective was to estimate the prevalence of fatigue and associated health-related lost productivity time (LPT) in U.S. workers.

The study involved a national cross-sectional telephone survey of workers. The researchers found that during a two-week period, 39.7% of workers reported fatigue. They also found that of the workers with fatigue, 65.7% reported health-related lost productivity time, compared to 26.4% of those without fatigue.

According to the researchers, workers with fatigue cost employers \$136.4 billion annually in health-related LPT. Other conclusions of the study were: fatigue is prevalent in the U.S. workforce, and when occurring with other health conditions, it is associated with significantly more lost productive work time.

Similarly, The National Sleep Foundation's 2005 *Sleep in America* poll found that sleep problems are cited as the most common reason people are late for work, and that almost 3 in 10 working adults say they have missed work or made errors at work because of sleep-related issues in the past three months.

Adapted from *NSF Alert*, January 30, 2007.

Scientists from Harvard School of Public Health, reported that people who take at least 3 naps a week lasting 30 minutes or longer, cut their risk of dying from a heart attack by 37%.

Challenges and Costs of Fatigued Shift Workers

Employees are a company's most valuable asset, but for six out of eight companies who have employees working non-traditional hours, management has additional challenges addressing the many costly issues affecting these workers.

Worker Fatigue

Fatigue is an added challenge in any operation where employees work late into the night or start early in the morning. Fatigued employees often are less productive, more prone to health problems, have more accidents and are more likely to leave their employment creating increased turnover, which increases the cost of doing business.

Increased Accidents

The growing awareness of fatigue, which contributes to drowsy driving and increased accidents, has led to drowsy driving legislation as well as increased corporate liability. Drowsy drivers are more accident prone due to experiencing micro-sleeps, which are brief involuntary episodes of sleep lasting for several seconds. These episodes are exhibited by erratic driving habits, momentary lapses of attention, and operating the vehicle on automatic pilot.

Sleep Disorders

In addition to the fatigue, those working non-traditional schedules are more prone to develop sleep disorders, such as sleep apnea, which can increase personal and corporate health care costs. Left untreated, sleep disorders contribute to a mounting sleep debt from chronic loss of sleep and accumulating sleep deprivation. Following are a number of consequences frequently associated with sleep deprivation.

Sleep Deprivation

Chronic sleep deprivation has been connected to decreased productivity and performance, impaired judgment, and an inability to handle complex tasks. Thinking and problem-solving becomes more rigid, accompanied by a decreased ability to comprehend rapidly changing situations.

Sleep deprivation can be as harmful to health as a poor diet or limited exercise. Long-term sleep loss has been linked to serious health problems including sleep apnea, high blood pressure, diabetes, elevated cholesterol, and being overweight. Since *shift workers* are more prone to having sleep disorders, they also may need treatment for the other related risk factors of heart disease, obesity and diabetes.

An important function of sleep is to help the body metabolize glucose to fuel body processes. Insulin is needed to allow glucose to enter the cells. Inadequate sleep prompts the body to create excess insulin, often leading to insulin resistance, a well-known risk factor for Type 2 diabetes. Additionally, excess insulin encourages the storage of body fat, especially in the waist area, linking it to high blood pressure and being overweight.

Ways to Improve Sleep

A study conducted by Circadian Technologies, Inc., puts the cost of fatigue-related accidents at companies with extended hours of operations at \$8.5 billion per year.

Quanta Dynamics offers a new dynamic feature: (Why Sleep?) Podcasts. They provide short, lively, discussions using professional speakers on various lifestyle and sleep informational topics. To access our Podcasts, go to our website homepage for a direct link.

A lack of sleep takes it toll on shift workers, and a good way to reverse their sleep debt is to encourage them to get adequate sleep each day. One way to reduce the risks from sleep loss and minimize the effects of daily stress is napping. If night shift workers are not able to get enough sleep due to work and family demands, a short nap for 15-20 minutes can give them a “pick me up.”

Other suggestions for improved sleep and increased productivity are: wear sunglasses while leaving work in the morning to maintain the body’s melatonin levels, the hormone that promotes sleep. Use bright light in the early evening to increase alertness and promote a better mood before work. At work, maintain a bright, well-lighted workplace in order to improve workers’ alertness during their shift.

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A Company Fatigue Management Program

For best results in addressing shift worker fatigue, consider implementing a fatigue management program. By incorporating worker training, worker feedback, and other effective strategies in your program, you will reduce your health care costs, decrease accidents, increase productivity and improve job satisfaction.

Printed with permission, Kathryn Hansen, Director of Sleep Wellness, St. Joseph Healthcare, Lexington, KY and Executive Director, Kentucky Sleep Society, February, 2007.

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