
Fatigue and shift work awareness



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The health and wellbeing of our people is vitally important to us at TfL. Not only is it crucial to look after our employees because it's the right thing to do, but also a fit and healthy workforce means a safer network for our colleagues, customers and members of the public.

This guide has been produced to help you support your family member or friend in managing their rest periods to help reduce the potential consequences of fatigue.



What is fatigue?

Simply put, fatigue is the feeling of being tired. It is generally different from the sleepy feeling of drowsiness, or the psychological feeling of apathy, although these might both accompany fatigue.

Fatigue is common and can negatively impact performance at work, family life and social relationships. It has a reputation as a vague and difficult problem for doctors to investigate, and many people with fatigue do not even report it to their doctor.

Fatigue is common and can affect everyday life

What are the causes of fatigue?

Although there can be a range of reasons for fatigue, there are generally three main causes:

1. Work-related factors:

For example, timing of work and rest periods, length and number of consecutive duties, work intensity

2. Individual factors:

For example, lifestyle, age, diet, medical conditions, drug and alcohol use (all affect quality and duration of sleep)

3. Environmental factors:

For example, family circumstances, responsibilities, adequacy of sleep environment

Fatigue can also arise from changes to lifestyle or routine, such as those caused by the arrival of a new baby. Or you may have other caring responsibilities or commitments that interrupt normal sleeping routines.



Spotting the signs of fatigue

We are often not good at assessing our own fatigue levels. We can get used to being tired and trying to cope – it can become the new normal.

It is important that you look out for signs of fatigue in your friend/family member to support their health and wellbeing:

Early warning signs

- Is your friend/family member very quiet or less chatty than usual?
- Are they fidgeting?
- Are they rubbing their eyes, or do their eyes look sore or dark?
- Have they become unusually moody, irritable or emotional?
- Do you know if they are going through a personal issue or crisis?
- Do they seem more forgetful than usual?
- Has there been a change to their appearance, or do they seem to be taking less care with personal hygiene?

Signs of serious fatigue

- Are their eyes slow to open and close?
- Are they yawning frequently?
- Are they blinking often or having long blinks?
- Do their eyes appear to be rolling back?
- Are they staring into space?
- Is their head drooping?
- Do they seem unsteady on their feet?
- Is their speech slurred?
- Are their hands shaking?

What is shift work?

TfL is a 24-hour business. Shift work is work activity that is scheduled outside standard daytime hours. To provide the best service we can to our customers, we often need our staff to work early in the morning, late at night or to work different hours over a period of time.

How can shift work affect an individual?

If shift work is not managed properly, it can have a negative impact on physical and mental wellbeing. This can affect many aspects of life, including eating and sleeping patterns, exercise and social life. People cope differently with shift work depending on health, fitness, age, lifestyle and domestic responsibilities.

Shift work disrupts the internal body clock. We generally perform better during the day when our heart rate and blood pressure are at a higher level. When we work irregular hours, we can become out of tune with the world around us and feel 'out of sorts'. Bodily functions, such as digestion and overall alertness, will adjust after a few days, but our internal body clock will never fully adapt to shift work, especially when changing back to normal daytime routines during rest days.

Shift work can also reduce our emotional stability due to a lack of sleep. If a shift worker feels irritable or grumpy on returning from a shift, this is usually because they need to rest, after which they will return to their usual selves. The same is true for anyone who has gone too long without sleep or has had poor quality sleep, so it is important to recognise these minor mood swings as a temporary symptom of fatigue.



What can you do to help?

- Be open to talking about fatigue, being supportive and considerate of what your friend/family member is saying
- Familiarise yourself with their shift schedules so that everyone can be included in social activities. Add shift and sleep times to a family calendar, and plan meal times together
- Try to plan any domestic duties around shift schedules so as not to compete with set times for rest and sleep
- Try to avoid creating noise or disturbance during dedicated rest periods. Consistent sleep patterns are key to reducing fatigue

Encourage them to create a positive sleep environment by focusing on:

- **Sound** – quiet environments improve sleep quality. Earplugs, white noise or background music could be used if it's too noisy
- **Temperature** – a comfortable room temperature is around 16 to 20 degrees Celsius
- **Light** – blue light close to bedtime affects sleep quality. Discourage smartphone or computer use before bed
- **De-stress** – encourage them to have a warm bath or shower before bed to aid relaxation
- **Diet** – try to ensure mealtimes are not too late into the evening, and discourage caffeine and alcohol consumption late in the day

Encourage them to take our fatigue self-assessment survey and, if they feel they need to, speak to their manager or talk to our Occupational Health and Wellbeing team for further advice.