



# IS THE GRAVEYARD SHIFT BURYING YOU?

By Kay Byers

**M**any workers are working night shifts and do not have the option of giving up the lifestyle entirely. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 15 million Americans are working either a permanent night shift or a rotating day-/night-shift work week. Those who work the deep-night shift can find lots of research, articles, and advice. But the question is, how can night workers minimize the graveyard shift's impact on their physical and emotional health?

First, when it comes to the negative effects of night-shift work, it's important to differentiate between what we can and can't control. Night-shift workers already know about the unhealthy results of their schedules, because they experience them daily! Some of these effects are listed below, but this list is certainly not comprehensive:

- ☹ Fatigue
- ☹ High cholesterol
- ☹ Lack of concentration
- ☹ Slow response time
- ☹ Irritability
- ☹ Elevated triglyceride levels
- ☹ High blood pressure
- ☹ Higher prevalence of metabolic syndrome

Our body's sleep patterns are controlled by a circadian rhythm. The circadian clock controls hormone release and modulates mood, alertness, and body temperature. Our bodies and minds are built to relax and cool down after dark and then become alert and ready for action in the morning. This circadian clock is very stubborn and hard to push around, but it's not impossible to do so. Night-shift workers can "trick" their circadian clocks by drinking coffee during their night shifts and then taking sedatives to help them sleep in the morning. That tactic will allow them to get the rest their bodies sorely need, but it's also unhealthy in the long run. Many folks will use this method if they are dealing with a rotational day- and night-shift schedule. For these individuals, shifting their circadian clocks is not a realistic option, because it takes about a week of consistency for such a change in biorhythms to occur.

Attempting to shift the body's circadian rhythm is a potentially good option for those with a set work schedule. The most effective way to attempt this shift in sleep rhythm is to expose oneself to intermittent bright light during the night shift. Then, on the way home, wear sunglasses and go to sleep immediately in a very dark bedroom. Research has shown that within about a week, you can shift your circadian rhythm to align with your night shift, allowing you to sleep soundly during the day.

The next logical question is how to handle your days off. Nobody wants to miss out on family functions or day-off events with friends! If you work a permanent night shift (i.e., you always work from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m.), you can employ a compromise system. On your way home from work at the end of your last shift before your days off, wear sunglasses and then go to sleep as soon as possible after arriving at home. Then, upon natural awakening, stay awake as long as possible—say, until around 3 or 4 a.m. Then go to sleep and sleep until noon, which would allow you to spend some time with day-working people on both days off. The difference between your sleep schedule on your night-shift days and your days off would probably be less than the difference most night-shift workers experience if they have not attempted to shift their circadian clocks. This compromise schedule is not ideal, but it is certainly workable.

Although psychologists are learning more about the impact of deep-night shift work, effective interventions remain a challenge. Developing healthy sleep habits is as important as occupational training. Employers who offer their night-shift employees frequent breaks and brief periods of physically stimulating activity could potentially increase productivity. Employees could then remain alert and focused during what is considered the most challenging period of the day to be awake. **N**

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