

The shift workers' guide to better wellbeing

Many of us don't work a typical 9 to 5 job these days and if you happen to be a truck driver, nurse, fireman, miner, pilot or call centre worker (among others) you'll often work shifts.

Shift work can play havoc with your physiology thanks to changes in work, eating and sleeping patterns. Research shows shift workers tend to have poor overall sleep quality, report feeling less refreshed upon waking and often suffer from gastrointestinal problems. Studies also indicate shift workers typically tend to snack more, eat more simple carbohydrates (sweets and refined grains), use more caffeine and alcohol and exercise less. If you're a shift worker it may seem like the way to wellbeing is not well stacked in your favour but there is some good news – simply by tweaking what you eat and when you eat it can have a significant impact on your health and energy.

There are certain foods such as carbohydrates (think bread, rice, and pasta) that tend to have a sleep inducing effect. The U.S. National Sleep Foundation call them 'snooze foods' for this reason because they contain an amino acid called tryptophan which can make you drowsy. Eating a large bowl of risotto before your night shift is probably not going to result in a high energy evening but choosing to eat your main meal of quality protein and vegetables in the early evening actually will help your productivity.

To find out how to balance the right foods with your schedule, check out our top ten tips:

TEN TIPS TO INCREASE YOUR ENERGY AND IMPROVE YOUR SLEEP



1 Avoid eating too much carbohydrate rich food during a shift if you are feeling tired (avoid breads, pasta & sugary foods! Eat protein foods in your meals and snacks during the shift. Try a smoothie, yoghurt, tuna or salmon wraps, chicken drumsticks, milk, a small handful of nuts, boiled eggs or cottage cheese.

2 Drink plenty of water, BUT... drink less fluid at the end of a shift, before going to bed, so you don't interrupt precious sleep with trips to the toilet!

3 Limit caffeine intake. Drink less than two "energy" drinks (go for sugar free) per day and no more than 3 coffees. A quick caffeine fix will increase alertness in the short term, however, avoid any caffeine within 6 hours of your sleep time otherwise it will affect the quality of your sleep.

4 Emphasise high fibre and healthy fats in your food choices to help counteract the common 'gastro' symptoms associated with working at night (common medical complaints suffered by shift workers include: flatulence/burping, abdominal bloating, diarrhoea/constipation, acid reflux –heartburn). Part of the reason is that during the night the gut rests so digestive processes, such as bowel movements, are decreased compared to during the day.

5 Don't miss out on vegetables! The main meal should be 'dinner' at home before your shift. Use frozen steamed vegetable packs for convenience.

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TIP
 Eat plenty of lean protein, just before going on shift.

- 6 Eat plenty of lean protein, especially just before going on shift because protein foods tend to have the opposite effect of carbohydrates (which make you sleepy). A great pre-shift main meal would be 150-200g steak or grilled fish + fist sized kumara mash + 1-2 cups stirfried vegetables.
- 7 For deeper, longer sleep ensure you don't eat anything heavy within 3 hours of going to sleep. Try yoghurt and fruit. These can promote sleep.
- 8 Include at least 30 minutes of planned exercise most days of the week. By exercising you become fitter. Fitter people have more energy.
- 9 To feel better - eat less sugar in your treats, snacks and drinks. Change to "diet" or sugar free soft drinks, replace sugar in tea or coffee with an alternative sweetener.
- 10 Have a nap - this will boost your total sleep. Naps work best when they are either very short (about 20 minutes) OR if you have more time aim for 90 minutes (1 full sleep cycle).

Example Shift Work Menu

Time	Meal	Food Suggestion
7pm	Pre-Shift Main Meal	150-200g chicken breast + fist size kumara + vegetables
8pm	Start Work	
11pm	Snack	Coffee + nuts + fruit
2am	Lunch	Wholegrain bread or crackers with 150g tuna + salad
4am	Home	Unwind, herbal tea
6am	Breakfast	Porridge + milk + fruit
8am	Sleep	