



FATIGUE AS AN OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD

- **Fatigue affects you mentally and physically.**
- **Not enough sleep is a major cause and sleepiness is a major effect.**
- **Fatigue increases the chances of making errors at work.**
- **It is a workplace health and safety risk.**
- **Everyone at work is responsible by law for controlling and preventing fatigue.**
- **Your risk increases if you do shift work, safety-critical work, boring work, long hours or spend a long time commuting or travelling.**

Note: All words that are underlined relate to topics in the Sleep Health Foundation Information Library at www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au

1. Do 'sleepiness' and 'fatigue' mean the same thing?

Often people use them as if they do mean the same thing. Both are linked with feeling "tired", but are two distinct conditions.

Sleepiness is when you feel that you need or want to sleep. It happens because of not getting enough good quality sleep. Sleepiness is one of the main symptoms of fatigue. But fatigue is more than just feeling sleepy. It also refers to physical and mental symptoms such as slower reaction times, poor mood, inattention and trouble focusing. As well as not getting enough sleep, fatigue can be due to (or made worse by) things to do with work, such as undertaking long hours, shift work, stressful or boring tasks and the work environment. The risk goes up if your workplace has a lot of noise, heat, cold, vibration or poor ventilation.

2. How can fatigue affect your work performance or safety?

Fatigue is recognised by relevant government authorities as a workplace health and safety risk and must be treated as such. Fatigue

impairs you as if you were drunk or on sedative drugs. In fact, studies show that 17 hours without sleep impairs your driving in the same way as having a blood alcohol level of 0.05 percent.

In addition to this, fatigue worsens your hand-eye coordination and makes it harder for you to communicate. Your brain does not process information or solve problems as well as it should. You also tend to take more risks. This means that your chance of making errors goes up. In turn this can be a danger to the health and safety of you and those around you. To make things worse, as you become sleepier, you are less aware of your reduced performance.

Fatigue has been found to played a role in many well known serious industrial events, such as when the Chernobyl and Three Mile Island nuclear power plants blew up, the Exxon Valdez ran aground, the Challenger space shuttle crashed and when Shen Neng ran aground on the Great Barrier Reef.

3. Who is most at risk?

Anyone who has sleeping problems, untreated sleeping disorders or who is just not getting enough sleep may be fatigued.

Shift workers are especially at high risk. They often need to work at a time when their body clock says they should sleep. They may also



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have to try and sleep when their body clock is geared to being awake and active. In fact, research has found that shift workers have 1-2 hours less sleep on average per 24 hours than non-shift workers.

If you do safety-critical work (such as driving and using heavy vehicles and machinery) then you are also at risk. So are people making important business decisions.

If you have a long commute to and from work, your risk may also be higher because of less time for rest and sleep.

Also, if you often travel across time zones for work, you are at risk of jet lag. Travellers may also suffer due to getting poor sleep in unfamiliar places.

4. Who is responsible for managing fatigue at work?

Managing fatigue in the workplace is a shared responsibility. Under Work Health and Safety laws, all people in the workplace are legally responsible for preventing fatigue.

The employer is responsible for making sure the work conditions are safe. This applies to things such as roster design. They must be able to clearly explain how they control risks linked to fatigue.

The worker is responsible for turning up to work fit for duty including not being impaired by fatigue. This means making sure that you have enough sleep between work shifts. You must also let your employer know if you think that you may be fatigued.

5. What should I do if I feel sleepy or fatigued at work?

Stop! Take a break. If you need to, let your supervisor know. It's important that you know your organisation's policies and procedures relating to fatigue management. Depending on the case, you may need to take a 15-20 minute 'power nap'. Caffeine may also help.

6. Where can I find out more about fatigue as an occupational hazard?

Visit www.sleephealthfoundation.org for information on these related topics:

[Shiftwork](#)

[Drowsy Driving](#)

[Excessive Daytime Sleepiness](#)

[Napping](#)

[Caffeine, Food and Sleep](#)

[Good Sleep Habits](#)

[Ten Tips for a Good Night's Sleep](#)

[Ten Tips to Combat Jet Lag](#)

[Sleeping Better in Your Hotel Room](#)

For information on over 60 different sleep related topics, written by professionals, visit the Sleep Health Foundation Information Library at www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au. The underlined topics in this article are covered in detail there.



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