



Fatigue: a WHS issue

Fatigue is a state of physical, mental or emotional impairment. Fatigue can develop over the short or long term, can prevent people from functioning safely and can have health effects.

In a work context, fatigue is more than feeling sleepy, tired and drowsy. It is a state of impairment which can be physical, mental or emotional or a combination of these.

Under WHS laws a person conducting a business or undertaking (e.g. the employer) must ensure the physical and psychological health and safety of workers and others.

They must:

- consult with workers and their representatives
- eliminate or minimise fatigue-related risks as much as they reasonably can.

Fatigue is a state of impairment which can be:



Physical



Mental



Emotional

or a combination of these

Fatigue can be caused by:



Work hours and shift design – this includes working long hours, working during some or all of the natural time for sleep or not allowing sufficient opportunity for sleep or rest.



Tasks, equipment or environments – this includes an imbalance between the demands of a worker's job, and the personal and work resources available to support them to manage these demands.



Individual – workers' levels of fatigue tolerance and vulnerability will differ, influenced by factors such as age, general health status, sleep disorders, and natural sleep-wake preferences (e.g. being a 'morning' or 'evening' person).

Fatigue can harm workers and other people.

It can harm:



workers' mental health,
e.g. anxiety, depression



workers' physical health,
e.g. heart disease, musculoskeletal disorders, diabetes, high blood pressure, gastrointestinal disorders, lower fertility, and



both workers and other persons when fatigue makes the work less safe,
e.g. where safety depends on workers' physical, mental or emotional abilities, such as when driving a vehicle.



Long working hours are common in Australia



12.4%

of Australian workers work 50 hours or more a week and some work more than 80 hours.¹



55+ hours

worked per week increases your risk of stroke by 25% and your risk of dying from ischemic heart disease by 17%, compared to working 35-40 hours.²



39+ hours

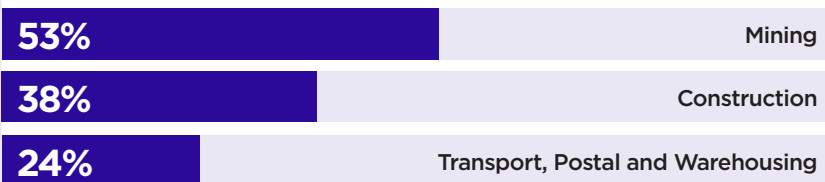
worked per week over a sustained period has been shown to lead to a decline in mental and physical health.³

Workers are often exposed to multiple fatigue-related hazards. Workers who work long hours are also more likely to be exposed to other hazards such as role overload and emotional demands.⁴

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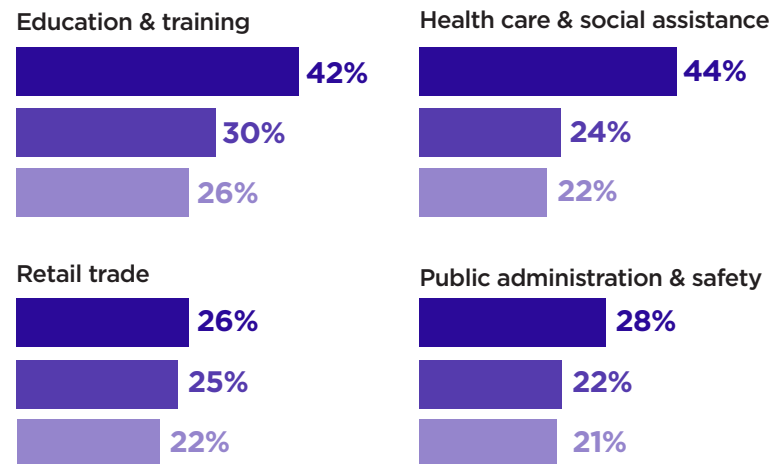
Industry insights

💡 Highest proportion of workers working more than 50 hours per week¹



💡 Workers likely to say their work is emotionally demanding and they feel physically drained and burnt out⁴

Emotionally demanding Physically drained Burnt out



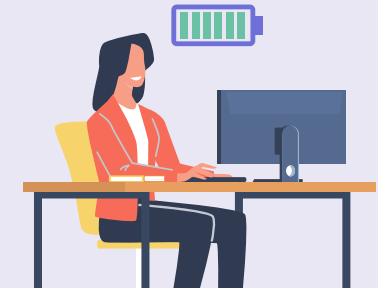
Manage the risks of fatigue at work

Prevent fatigue, for example:

- minimise long or irregular hours
- minimise working nights (or other times when workers would normally sleep)
- provide breaks (between and during shifts)
- set realistic deadlines
- provide equipment to assist with tasks
- make the environment a comfortable temperature for the work being done.

Prevent fatigue-related incidents, for example:

- monitor for signs of fatigue
- have systems to prevent fatigue-related errors
- have systems to protect from the consequences of fatigue-related errors.



Scan the QR code
For more information see the [model Code of Practice: Managing fatigue risks at work](#).

Sources

- ¹ ABS Census of Population and Housing 2021
- ² World Health Organisation and International Labour Organisation Joint Estimates of the Work-related Burden of Disease and Injury, 17 September 2021
- ³ Multiple studies, e.g. "Hour-glass ceilings: Work-hour thresholds, gendered health inequities", ScienceDirect, available from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S027795361730031X>
- ⁴ People at Work survey data, 30 November 2020 – 31 December 2024