



# Managing fatigue in your workplace: for small business



This fact sheet for small businesses outlines how you can manage the risks from fatigue and meet your work health and safety (WHS) duties.

## What is fatigue?

Fatigue is more than feeling sleepy, tired and drowsy. Fatigue harms workers' health and reduces their ability to work safely.

**Fatigue is a state of impairment which can be:**



**Physical**



**Mental**



**Emotional**

**or a combination of these**

Fatigue impacts:

- **physical** abilities like coordination, strength and reaction time
- **mental** and cognitive abilities like decision making and concentration, and
- **emotional** abilities like engaging with others or managing anger and frustration.

Fatigue can develop over the short or long term.

## What causes fatigue?

Fatigue arises from work-related and non-work-related sources. It's important to recognise the impacts both can have on a worker's health and safety, either separately or together. Fatigue can be caused by:



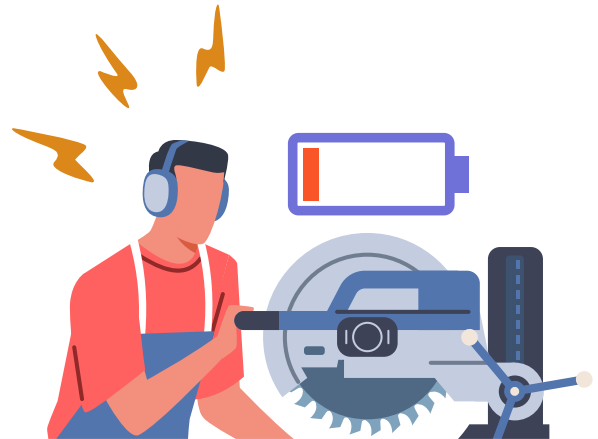
**Work hours and shift design** e.g. working long hours, working nights (or other times when they normally sleep) or not having enough opportunity for sleep or rest.



**Tasks, equipment or environments** e.g. physically or mentally hard work, too much work to do with the time and resources they have, repetitive tasks or an uncomfortable workplace (such as too hot, loud or with poor air quality).



**Individual** e.g. time since last sleep, age, general health, sleep disorders, working second jobs and whether they are a 'morning' or 'evening' person.



## What are your responsibilities?

You must manage the risk of workers becoming fatigued (which can harm their health). You must also manage the risk caused when fatigue increases other WHS risks (e.g. increased risk of a crash if fatigued workers are driving or operating machinery).

**You must:**

- **eliminate or minimise fatigue risks** as much as you reasonably can
- **consult workers and any health and safety representatives (HSRs)** about fatigue risks and how you will control them, and
- **consult, cooperate and coordinate** with other businesses you work with where you both have duties to manage fatigue.



Small business owners often work in the business. In this case you must control fatigue risks for you as well as your workers.

Australian studies show that working more than 39 hours per week over a prolonged period can lead to a decline in mental and physical health.

The World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization report working 55 or more hours per week is a serious health hazard.

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### How can you manage fatigue?

Managing risks involves 4 steps:

1. **identify** what might cause fatigue or where fatigue might increase other risks
2. **assess** the risk of, and from, fatigue
3. **control** the risk by implementing the most effective and reliable control measures to prevent fatigue completely (where possible) or minimise the risk from fatigue, and
4. **review** and monitor the controls you put in place to check they are working and whether improvements can be made.

These steps must be done in consultation with your workers and any HSRs.

Below are examples of ways you can manage fatigue risks. Not all will be reasonable in your workplace and you may have other risks or ways of controlling them not listed below.

Where it is not reasonable to control the risk in one way you may need to do more to control the risks in other ways. For example, if you can't avoid long shifts you may need to provide more breaks or give workers more control of the pace they work at.



### Working hours and shift design

- Limit the length of shifts and allow at least 12 hours for workers to recover between shifts.
  - Avoid long hours over a week, limit the number of consecutive workdays and allow at least one full day off a week.
  - Avoid contacting workers outside of work time.
  - Schedule regular shift patterns and avoid last minute changes.
  - Provide regular flexible breaks during shifts.<sup>1</sup>
  - Avoid work at times when workers would normally be sleeping.
- If night work is necessary, consider:
    - limiting consecutive night shifts to 3 nights.
    - avoiding safety critical work between 2am and 6am, and
    - providing as much notice as possible before night shifts so workers have the chance to adjust their sleep patterns.

<sup>1</sup> Note – a relevant modern award or enterprise agreement may set out minimum break or time-off requirements for the employees it covers.



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### Tasks, equipment or environment

- Avoid long periods of high physical, mental or emotional effort.
- Allow workers time to adjust to new tasks.
- Select tools and equipment to minimise mental and physical work demands (e.g. power tools or software).
- Ensure tools and equipment are well-maintained.
- Streamline or design out unnecessary tasks to reduce workloads.
- Ensure the workload is appropriate for the skills and experience of the worker and the time available.
- Redesign jobs to include a variety of tasks.
- Ensure work areas are well lit.
- Address [psychosocial hazards](#) (e.g. workplace conflict or poor role clarity).
- Make the work environment comfortable (e.g. temperature, noise and air quality).
- Provide break facilities, drinking water and healthy food, or a way to store and heat healthy food.
- Ensure worker accommodation you provide allows for restful sleep and recovery.

### Individual (both work and non-work)

- Ensure managers, supervisors and workers discuss, understand and set clear expectations about managing fatigue. This may be achieved through mechanisms such as training and toolbox talks.
- Have clear fatigue policies clarifying expectations of workers, such as guidance on secondary employment. These policies should be based on fatigue risk assessments and ensure that working reasonable hours across multiple employers is not unreasonably restricted.
- Have a process for workers to report fatigue. Workers are more likely to accurately report fatigue if they are confident it will lead to WHS improvements and not result in blame.
- Have a system for managers and workers to assess fitness for work before a shift.
- Consult with workers to identify if individual factors might increase the risk of fatigue and how they can be managed (e.g. travel time between work and home, workers with poor sleep environments, sleep disorders or caring responsibilities).

### Fatigue impacts on other risks

- If you are concerned a worker may be fatigued, do not direct or allow them to carry out high risk tasks.
- Assess where and how fatigue might impact on other risks (e.g. operating machinery, handling hazardous substances or administering medication).
- Prevent fatigue-related errors if possible (e.g. provide tools which prevent errors or schedule safety critical tasks early in a worker's shift).
- Protect workers from harm if fatigue-related errors occur (e.g. provide cars with safety features, or ensure equipment has appropriate guards and is fitted with safety trigger mechanisms to stop the equipment safely if the operator falls asleep).
- Implement systems to protect workers from harmful workplace interactions and behaviours (e.g. providing options to refer difficult customers to a supervisor if they are fatigued).



Workers also have duties to manage fatigue risks. Workers must take reasonable care of their own health and safety and the health and safety of others. They must also comply with reasonable health and safety instructions, as much as they reasonably can, and cooperate with reasonable health and safety policies or procedures you have communicated to them.

The *Fatigue worker fact sheet* provides information to help workers.



For further information see the *model Code of Practice: Managing the risk of fatigue at work* on the Safe Work Australia website [www.swa.gov.au](http://www.swa.gov.au).