



Managing fatigue: for workers



This fact sheet provides general information about fatigue and fatigue management for workers.

What is fatigue and why is it a problem?

Fatigue is more than feeling sleepy, tired or drowsy. Fatigue harms your health and reduces your ability to work safely.

Fatigue impacts:

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

This means you (or those around you) are more at risk if you are fatigued and doing tasks where safety relies on these abilities. For example, driving, working at heights, operating machinery, handling dangerous chemicals or doing electrical work.

What causes fatigue?

Work can cause or contribute to fatigue. Factors outside of work can also contribute to fatigue and these different factors can interact. Fatigue can be caused by:



Work hours and shift design e.g. working long hours, working nights (or times when you would 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 you have, repetitive tasks or an uncomfortable workplace (e.g. too hot, loud or poor air quality).



Individual e.g. time since you last slept, age, general health, sleep disorders, and whether you are a 'morning' or 'evening' person.

Fatigue is a state of impairment which can be:



Physical



Mental



Emotional

or a combination of these



Australian studies have shown 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 International Labour Organization have found working 55 or more hours per week is a serious health hazard increasing the risk of heart disease and stroke.

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Your rights and protections at work

Under the model WHS laws, the person conducting the business or undertaking (your employer) is responsible for keeping you safe at work, as much as they reasonably can. This means they must eliminate, or minimise, risks like fatigue as much as they reasonably can.

Your employer must consult you about work health and safety matters. Consultation involves sharing information and giving you the opportunity to share your views. They must consider those views before making decisions on health and safety matters.

If workers choose, you can elect a health and safety representative (HSR) to represent you on health and safety matters. Consultation must include any HSRs, and trained HSRs have powers they can use in certain circumstances if work is unsafe.

You also have the right to cease or refuse to carry out unsafe work if you have a reasonable concern that it will expose you to a serious risk to your health or safety. The risk must be from something immediate (e.g. you are already fatigued and can't safely operate machinery).

As a worker, you must:

- ✓ take reasonable care for your own health and safety (e.g. making sure you use the opportunities you have to sleep, so you are fit for work)
- ✓ take reasonable care not to harm the health and safety of other people (e.g. don't drive if fatigued)
- ✓ comply with reasonable health and safety instructions (e.g. follow instructions to take regular breaks), and
- ✓ co-operate with reasonable WHS policies or procedures that you are made aware of (e.g. follow policies for working second jobs or let your manager or supervisor know if you are fatigued).



Signs of fatigue

Learn to recognise some of the signs of fatigue in yourself or in workers around you. Below are some signs of fatigue, this is not an exhaustive list and these signs could have other causes:

- behaviour changes, such as arriving late for work more often
- not being fully productive or engaged
- falling asleep at work or excessive yawning
- reduced alertness
- noticeable problems communicating with colleagues or customers
- impaired decision-making and judgement
- reduced hand-eye coordination, reaction time or slow reflexes
- reduced ability to process information
- increased errors or reduced performance
- feeling tired, even after sleep
- needing more hours of sleep during days off
- blurred vision or problems with understanding or processing what you see, or
- short term memory problems or an inability to concentrate.

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Tips to manage fatigue



What you can do at work

Talk with others about fatigue

- Participate in consultation on fatigue and how it is managed.
- Report concerns, near-misses and incidents as soon as possible.
- Familiarise yourself with your workplace's policies about fatigue.
- Speak to your manager or supervisor, or HSR if anything in your job is making you feel fatigued.
- Monitor for signs of fatigue in yourself and others and report fatigue to your manager or supervisor.

Rest breaks during your shift

- Take all your breaks during your shift to minimise fatigue.
- Where possible take breaks in a location where you can safely disengage from work.
- Use breaks wisely to refresh yourself in whatever way works best for you.



What you can do away from work

- Plan to get 7-9 hours sleep every 24 hours. You may be able to sleep more quickly by having:
 - a pre-sleep routine to help you wind down, and
 - a dark and quiet room at a comfortable temperature.
- Use your leave entitlements as appropriate, e.g. take sick leave if unwell.
- When starting night shifts, have a short nap before your first night shift.
- Talk to your doctor about health problems affecting your sleep or if you have trouble sleeping.
- Prioritise looking after yourself e.g. eating well, exercising and getting enough sleep.
- Fully disconnect from work if possible, e.g. don't look at work emails after hours.



If you feel fatigued

- Stop (or don't start) tasks where fatigue may increase the risk (e.g. safety critical tasks such as operating machinery or administering medication).
- Be aware of how fatigue may impair your physical, mental and emotional abilities.
- Ask others to check in on you.
- Inform your supervisor or manager that you feel fatigued.
- If doing work that involves a lot of sitting, go for a short walk or stand.
- Keep the lighting in your work area bright if you can.
- Drink water to stay hydrated.
- Avoid using stimulants (e.g. coffee or energy drinks) to manage fatigue.



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.