

Shift Work Disorder: Important Information for Clinicians

An estimated 20% of the US workforce participates in some shift work. Shift work disorder is insomnia and/or excessive sleepiness that occurs when a recurring work schedule overlaps with the usual sleep episode.

How much sleep do my patients with shift work sleep disorder need?

All adults should sleep 7 or more hours per day on a regular basis to promote optimal health.

Sleeping less than 7 hours per day on a regular basis is associated with adverse health outcomes, including weight gain and obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and stroke, depression, impaired immune function, increased pain, and increased risk of death¹.

Inadequate sleep also decreases performance which increases errors and resultant accidents and injuries in the workplace. Shift work can heighten these risks and lead to drowsy driving and deadly motor vehicle accidents.

What treatments are available for my patients with shift work sleep disorder?

In addition to behavioral measures, armodafinil and modafinil are FDA-approved agents to reduce sleepiness associated with shift work. Melatonin or prescribed hypnotic medications may improve daytime sleep, however, cautious use is required given side effects and potential residual effects during the work shift.

Patients should also be screened for other sleep disorders such as obstructive sleep apnea, insomnia, restless legs syndrome, circadian rhythm sleep-wake disorders, and parasomnias.



TIPS to give your patients:

- Devote at least 7 hours to sleep per day.
- Try to keep the same sleep schedule on work days and days off. Keeping a routine helps your body know when to be alert and when to sleep.
- If you work rotating shifts, ask your manager to schedule a natural, “clockwise” rotation. This means that your new shift will have a start time that is later than your last shift.
- Plan ahead for a major change in a shift work schedule. Begin to alter your sleep time a few days in advance. This will make it easier for your body to adjust.
- If possible, plan to take a 20-30 minute nap during a break in your shift to improve alertness without grogginess. Caffeine in moderation may also be helpful to improve alertness. A longer nap before reporting for a night shift is also beneficial.
- Exposure to bright light on the job can improve alertness during night shift work.
- Arrange for someone to pick you up after a night shift, or take a bus or cab home. Drowsy driving can put your life and the lives of other drivers at risk.
- If you need to sleep during the day, avoid exposure to sunlight. If you must go outside, wear sunglasses. The bedroom should be cool, quiet, and dark.
- Make sure others in your home are aware of your work schedule and maintain a quiet environment
- Consider using melatonin (up to 10mg) when trying to sleep during the day or even to help sleep at night.
- Avoid caffeine, bright light, and vigorous exercise 4 hours before bedtime and minimize alcohol use.
- Discontinue the use of electronic devices (computers, cell phones, tablets) at least 30 minutes prior to bedtime.

An example of a sleep schedule for a patient who will be rotating shifts:

Schedule	Sleep Time
Evening Shift (5 p.m. — 1 a.m.)	3 a.m. — 11 a.m.
Night 1 of Transition (off work)	5 a.m. — 1 p.m.
Night 2 of Transition (off work)	7 a.m. — 3 p.m.
Night 3 of Transition (off work)	8 a.m. — 4 p.m.
Night Shift (11 p.m. — 7 a.m.)	9 a.m. — 5 p.m.

Reference:

1. Watson NF, Badr MS, Belenky G, Bliwise DL, Buxton OM, Buysse D, Dinges DF, Gangwisch J, Grandner MA, Kushida C, Malhotra RK, Martin JL, Patel SR, Quan SF, Tasali E. Recommended amount of sleep for a healthy adult: a joint consensus statement of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and Sleep Research Society. *J Clin Sleep Med* 2015;11(6):591–592.

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