



Fatigue tips during COVID-19

At the National Safety Council, we recognize the stressful and eventful times the world is currently experiencing with the outbreak of COVID-19. After reaching out to our membership, we understand that NSC members are still seeking, perhaps more than ever, tips on how to maintain safety in this changed environment. In this post, we would like to present some helpful tips on how to manage workplace fatigue, especially seeing as many essential businesses may have transitioned to 24/7 operations and longer shifts/work hours for employees.

Before we get into the tips, it's important to make the connection between worker fatigue and safety. The drowsiness, distraction and lack of alertness that is associated with fatigue can have devastating effects for both workers and organizations in terms of injuries and fatalities. A National Safety Council survey (2018) found that nearly all American workers (97%) have at least one risk factor of fatigue, with 43% of workers not obtaining the recommended 7-9 hours of sleep a day. This reduces productivity and efficiency, and increases the risk of injury.

Organizations in safety-critical industries also have higher risk because the impact of fatigue is more than just lower productivity. Increased health care costs, lawsuits, breach-of-contract issues and lost business are just a few of the significant financial costs of fatigue that organizations may experience. With these consequences in mind, we turn now to some helpful tips to addressing workplace fatigue in light of the current pandemic.

Planning for demanding (physically, mentally) and repetitive tasks

Regular breaks during a work shift allow for both physical and mental restoration. Short, frequent breaks (say, 10-15 minutes every two hours) are better than a single longer break mid-shift, providing employees a chance to clear their heads and feel refreshed when transitioning between tasks. A dedicated break room facility can enhance these benefits. Employers may consider staggering these shorter, more frequent breaks so that employees can maintain a healthy social distance.

Days off during the week

Policies should be established to allow for regular and predictable blocks of days off. Workers should be provided as much advance notice as possible of long blocks of work days so they can best plan for rest and sleep during their time off. During a pandemic, it's expected that some workers, especially in healthcare, will be working extended shifts with fewer days off.

Compensatory rest periods after long blocks of work days, however, will allow workers to obtain recovery sleep and return to work with more energy and alertness.

Managing shift scheduling

Planned, consistent work schedules allow workers to better plan for sleep during their time between work periods, even if work is scheduled for early morning or overnight shifts. Limiting shift work is typically preferable, considering that our body clocks are naturally at a low energy point between midnight and 6:00 a.m. Carefully planning shift schedules during pandemic times can allow business operations to continue with fewer workers on site at a time.

Fatigue reporting systems

It's recommended that any organization include a fatigue reporting system, such as in the transportation industry, to ensure that workers in safety critical jobs are fit for duty. Another good measure is to include fatigue as an element in incident reporting so that risk factors (e.g. time of day, type of task) can be recorded and tracked. Under pandemic conditions, it's expected that fatigue risk will increase. Having fatigue reporting systems in place can help organizations monitor and control risk even when conditions return to "normal."

For more information on how to manage workplace fatigue, please visit nsc.org/fatigue. And for the latest information on managing workplace safety during the coronavirus pandemic, please visit nsc.org/coronavirus.