Hi Alice,

Do you have any suggestions for trying to stay healthy and sane while working the graveyard shift?

Thanks very much.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Almost 15 million Americans work night shifts and deal with the same struggles that you are facing. Sleeping during the day and trying to stay alert at night is at odds with your body’s natural schedule or circadian rhythm that is set by the sun. The resulting sleep deprivation can be challenging to both your physical and mental well-being, but you can try a number of different sleep strategies to keep you sane and healthy while on this difficult schedule.

- **Eat well and exercise.** Because you stay awake all night, you might find it difficult to follow a consistent eating schedule, or you may snack a lot to keep yourself from falling asleep. However, eating three evenly spaced meals and exercising regularly will keep your energy levels up and make you sleep better when you need to. Avoiding large meals, alcohol, or stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine within three to four hours of bedtime can also help you sleep soundly.

- **Practice good sleep habits.** Although it’s harder to sleep properly when you do shift work, it’s not impossible. Creating a restful environment when you sleep is a great first step. For example, turn your phone on silence or off, try making your room as dark as possible (you can use sun-blocking curtains, for example), hang a do-not-disturb sign on your door, and speak to your living companions about keeping the noise down during the day while you’re sleeping. Staying on roughly the same sleep schedule every day of the week, even when you’re not working, is a great way to prevent your body from getting confused. Rising at the same time every day is especially important. Light therapy, or using artificial bright lights when you are supposed to be awake is also helpful. As is avoiding sunlight when you get off work (in order to prepare for bed). Many people find melatonin, a sleep-inducing hormone, helpful for schooling their sleep schedule. Just keep in mind that melatonin’s long-term effects are unknown and that other sleep aids can cause dependency if used for too long.

- **Take naps.** Naps can help you stay alert during work, improve your performance, and
protect you from work-related injuries and fatigue-induced traffic accidents. Normally, a 30- to 90-minute nap just before work or a 30-minute nap during your shift is best to keep your energy up.

Following these tips to stay well-rested can help you stay healthy and energized physically, and can also improve your mental health and your social relationships. When you’re getting enough sleep, finding time to hang out with your family and friends and engaging in fun and relaxing activities will be easier and more enjoyable. And having people to talk to, support you, and blow off steam with will help you stay sane while you work the sleepless graveyard shift.

Good luck!

Alice!

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Published date:
Oct 11, 2013
Last reviewed on:
Nov 26, 2014

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