

Fatigue and how to manage it

The risks and why it matters in the workplace

Fatigue is caused by inadequate sleep quantity, inadequate sleep quality or both. Fatigue has far-reaching impacts on our ability to think, especially complex thinking, as well as maintain attention to tasks. It also adversely impacts the way we behave, resulting in either irritable outbursts or withdrawn non-communicative behaviour, which can make team working difficult.

These impacts of fatigue on our thinking and behaviour mean that fatigue in the workplace needs to be managed, just like any other workplace hazard. Work practices may increase the risk that someone is fatigued, and fatigue itself can increase the risk of the work and the likelihood of error. Fatigue risk management seeks to reduce the risk of fatigue in two ways, firstly **fatigue reduction** (increasing the ability of people to get good quality and duration sleep by reducing work practices that disrupt sleep) and also by **fatigue proofing** (reducing the likelihood of a fatigued person making an error that leads to an incident by the use of enhanced controls).

What may cause fatigue, in and outside of the workplace?

Fatigue may occur as a result of work practices, or it may occur for reasons outside of the control of the workplace;

- Non-work related reasons include poor sleep for a multitude of reasons, having young children, suffering from a medical sleep disorder, inadequate personal sleep practices, worry or medical conditions that cause pain.
- Work-related fatigue can also occur for a multitude of reasons, including shift work, business travel across time zones, extended hours due to heavy workloads, crisis management where intense work load can extend into sleep hours, global teleconferences at times that disrupt sleep, work worry and pressure.

What impacts does fatigue have in the workplace?

Fatigue has far-reaching impacts on the way we think and behave;

- The effects of fatigue in the workplace mean it is more likely you will make errors, leading to safety incidents.
- Fatigue can lead to impaired decision making, slowed reaction times, harder to see the big picture, difficulty in forecasting (seeing the “what if” concerns when making choices), impaired communication, and periods of irritability and mood swings.
- When you are fatigued, it becomes more difficult to assess your own performance, and identify how impaired you really are.
- You may struggle to perform, and miss deadlines, are more likely to produce poor quality work, and your thinking can be narrow – missing opportunities or failing to see risks.
- The behavioural aspects of fatigue mean you are less likely to be good team member, and may alienate others – including customers, business partners and other stakeholders due to difficult, irritable behaviour or poorer communication.
- Some well-known and tragic incidents have fatigue as a causal factor: e.g. the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the Challenger Space disaster, and the Texas City Refinery explosion.

How to manage fatigue in the workplace

Fatigue risk management should include controls that can be used no matter what the cause is;

Fatigue reduction

- Workplace practices should be reviewed to determine which practices may increase the risk of fatigue.
- Shift work is necessary in 24-hour operations, but roster design and other shift work requirements should be reviewed along with operational requirements to minimise fatigue as far as practicable.
- Practices that lead to extended hours, or encroach on sleep time, should also be reviewed to determine how these can be changed to minimise or avoid sleep disruption.
- When relevant, bio-mathematical modelling of fatigue likelihood can be helpful to estimate risk.

Fatigue proofing

- These strategies are used when there is still the risk of fatigued team members working at site (such as will occur with night shift workers, people who just did not sleep well, people with very young children, and so on).
- There are a multitude of fatigue proofing strategies that can be used to reduce the risk of a fatigued person making an error. Some of these strategies are listed in the fatigue proofing document (link below). Other strategies can be developed in conjunction with the workforce, and with the support of your local HSE partner.
- Each site should have a fatigue risk management plan pertinent to that specific workplace.

Reach out

If you need further support reach out to our [Employee Assistance Program](#) for managing fatigue related issues.