

# NUTRITION FOR SHIFT WORKERS



Shift workers face unique health and dietary challenges. This resource provides evidence-based nutrition recommendations which may assist those employed in shift work environments. Optimal nutrition choices are beneficial for overall health, as well as workplace productivity.

## *the importance of sleep*



**ALTHOUGH THIS RESOURCE FOCUSES ON NUTRITION, ADEQUATE SLEEP IS AN IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION FOR SHIFT WORKERS. NOT ONLY DOES IT HAVE MANY HEALTH IMPLICATIONS, BEING TIRED OFTEN LEADS TO UNHEALTHY FOOD CHOICES**



## SHIFT WORK

Shift work is any kind of work that occurs outside a traditional daytime or 9am-5pm time period. It could encompass night shifts, early morning shifts, rotating shifts, or anything in between. 1 in 5 Australian employees are currently classified as shift workers.

## SHIFT WORK & THE CIRCADIAN RHYTHM

The human body has a natural body clock (which is roughly 24-hours in duration), called the circadian rhythm. Morning sunlight triggers your master clock (located in the brain) to release hormones which help regulate metabolism of energy, your body temperature and other appropriate daytime processes. At night, different hormones are released which help the body rest and repair itself. The human body is not well equipped to work during the night and sleep during the day; shift work disrupts the circadian rhythm.

## SHIFT WORK & HEALTH

A body clock mismatch of eating at night instead of resting creates dysfunction in the circadian rhythm, and when combined with inadequate sleep and increased stress, can lead to a range of health concerns. Studies have indicated that shift workers are up to 40% greater risk of obesity, cardiovascular disease, and Type 2 Diabetes. Healthy eating whilst working shifts can be difficult, but not impossible.

Not all workplaces create an environment which supports healthy eating. Retain some power in your food choices and create opportunities for healthy behaviour at work:

- Take your own snacks rather than using vending machines
- Use insulated esky bags and thermos containers to keep food hot/cold if you don't have access to appropriate storage and heating facilities
- Be mindful of over-indulging in workplace social eating such as pizzas, cakes & chocolate

## WORKPLACE EATING ENVIRONMENT

*Prioritise healthy eating*





## WHEN SHOULD I EAT?

The human body is designed to metabolise food during daylight hours, so restrict eating at night as much as possible:

- Maintain a regular eating pattern with the same number of meals each day, regardless of your shifts
- Eat breakfast before your day sleep, but keep it small and wait 1-2hrs before you sleep
- Eat every 4-6hrs while you are awake
- Aim for a minimum 5hr fasting period during the night (between 10pm & 6am)
- Eat a decent meal before your shift to prevent hunger and overeating throughout your shift



## WHAT SHOULD I EAT ON SHIFT?

If you need to eat during the night, choose **high protein** foods rather than high carbohydrate snacks. Continue to eat high quality carbohydrates such as wholegrains during daylight hours. Having healthy options prepared ahead of time will reduce the desire to snack on unhealthy processed foods.



Good quality yoghurt, vegetable sticks with hummus, raw, unsalted nuts & seeds, fruit, and boiled eggs all make convenient snacks; keep your portion sizes small.



If you feel like you need something more substantial, add a small serve of tinned fish, or choose a Minestrone Soup or slow cooked casserole. Liquid nutrition is less taxing on the digestive system at night, and these options will warm you when your body temperature dips overnight.

### WHAT SHOULD I DRINK ON SHIFT?

If you feel like you need caffeine to get you through your shift, use it strategically (eg drink 1-2 coffees at the start of your shift, then switch to herbal tea). Drinking too much caffeine will increase your tolerance and reduce the stimulant effects over time.

Allow 4-6hrs between caffeine and sleep.

Choose **water** over soft drinks, energy drinks & protein shakes.

