

How shift work can impact on health, safety and wellbeing

Impact on the individual

The body's natural circadian rhythm is our body clock, which is tuned to where we live on the planet, the time of the sun rising and setting, and the chemical changes that occur between waking and sleeping. Shift work can negatively affect this rhythm, the clearest way to describe this is the well-known phenomenon of jetlag.

In addition to being a health risk, fatigue associated with sleep deprivation can impact patient safety (e.g. increased risk of medication errors) and the ability of the shift worker to drive safely, particularly at the end of a night shift.

Reported health effects

Shift work can impact our health in many ways, it can cause or contribute to the following:
fatigue and sleep disorders

obesity

type 2 diabetes

cardiovascular disease

digestive disorders

mental ill health (anxiety, depression)

some evidence suggests an impact on reproductive health

some evidence suggests an increased incidence of cancer.

Tolerance to shift work can also alter with age, long-term health conditions and during pregnancy.