



Healthy Eating Advice for Shift Workers

Shift workers should give special attention to the food and drink they consume. The human body is designed to digest food during the day, rather than during the night. Eating at night time results in slower digestion which can cause weight gain and constipation. Shift workers can help this by eating foods that are easily digested.

It is also important to maintain stable blood-sugar levels. Foods that can make blood-sugar levels rise and fall slowly are called low glycaemic index foods (low GI). Eating low GI foods such as bran, porridge, muesli, oranges, apples, low-fat yoghurt, vegetables, wholegrain bread and a small amount of nuts, can help a shift worker maintain an even blood-sugar level throughout the night.

Shift schedules should be designed to give workers adequate time between shifts to allow them to maintain a healthy lifestyle, to have regular meal times, exercise and sleeping patterns.

Healthy Eating Recommendations

- Eat a range of foods from each of the four main food groups:
 - Vegetables and fruit
 - Breads and cereals, preferably wholegrain
 - Milk and milk products, preferably reduced or low-fat options
 - Lean meat, poultry, eggs or alternatives.
- Stick as closely as possible to a normal day and night pattern of food intake.
- Avoid eating, or at least restrict energy intake, between midnight and 6am, and attempt to eat at the beginning and end of a shift.
- Eating before a morning/daytime sleep will help to avoid waking due to hunger. However, it is advisable for this meal to be small; a large meal (1-2 hours before sleep) could cause difficulty in falling asleep. The meal should contain plenty of low GI foods.
 - Wholegrain cereals
 - Wholegrain toast
 - Fruit
 - Reduced or low-fat yogurt
- The main meal should be eaten after waking from a morning/daytime sleep, before the shift starts, and should contain a mixture of protein and carbohydrates to help you wake up and give energy for the rest of the day and night.
 - Lean meat, chicken, eggs, fish
 - Pasta, rice, potatoes, cereals, wholegrain breads



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- Vegetables
- Low-fat dairy products
- Fruit
- Lighter type food options should be eaten during shift breaks. Eating small amounts of protein and low GI snacks is recommended for alertness, large amounts (meals) can be hard to digest throughout the night. Fresh fruit is also good as it has lots of fibre to aid digestion processes as well as natural sugars for an energy boost.
 - Lean meat
 - Lentils
 - Wholegrain sandwiches
 - Soup and wholegrain breads
 - Breakfast drinks or fruit smoothies
 - Beans/eggs on wholegrain toast
 - Low-fat dairy products
 - Raw nuts
 - Fresh fruit
 - Hummus and raw vegetables
- Drink fluids regularly to help prevent dehydration which can increase tiredness
- Stimulants such as caffeine and energy drink can remain in the body for up to 8 hours after consumption and may increase alertness, and therefore make falling asleep after work more difficult. Those that feel they require caffeine during the shift should aim to have this at the start and switch to non-caffeinated drinks as the shift progresses
- Avoid alcohol as a means of getting to sleep. It may initially sedate you, making it easier to fall asleep; however, as it is metabolized and cleared from your system, it causes arousals and therefore disturbed sleep

Top Tips

- Make the main meal before your night shift rich in protein and carbohydrate to give you lasting energy
- Snack on small low GI and protein foods throughout your night shift
- Limit caffeinated beverages to the start of the shift
- A balanced diet, tailored to the shift pattern helps you keep you alert, active and healthy