

SHIFT WORK: *Managing the Challenges of Disrupted Sleep Patterns and Extended Duty Hours*

Law enforcement officers frequently work either the day shift or night shift for weeks at a time. If officers working nights keep the same sleep-wake patterns on days off as they do on work nights, sleep will be more restful and efficient. Officers working nights may change their routine on off-duty days to take advantage of social opportunities or outdoor activities during the daytime. Required court appearances, mandatory training, or administrative tasks can also disrupt optimal sleep-wake cycles. These alterations may result in sleep difficulties and decreased performance.

For most law enforcement officers, night shift work will be required at some point during their careers. Large scale public emergencies such as natural disasters or terrorist attacks may require extended shifts and altered duty hours. However, several strategies can be used to mitigate the adverse effects of altered sleep-wake cycles that result from night duties, shift changes, or extended operations:

Strategies

1. Eat nutritionally balanced meals. Good nutrition is important for optimal performance under stress. Balanced nutrition may also counteract the effects of sleep deprivation.
2. Avoid use of alcohol to facilitate sleep. Though onset

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of sleep will occur more quickly, sleep will be less restorative. Avoid the use of stimulants including caffeine and energy drinks as their effects may persist beyond the duration of your shift.

3. Consider meditation or relaxation exercises as these may speed onset of sleep.
4. Routine exercise enhances sleep onset and quality (even when work requires sleep during daylight hours). Avoid heavy exercise just prior to bedtime — this may prolong wakefulness.
5. Consider “power-naps” of 15–30 minutes when time allows. The effective length varies among individuals.
6. Be alert to cumulative effects of sleep deprivation such as irritability, headaches, poor concentration, and forgetfulness. If symptoms develop seek medical assistance.
7. Since there is more background environmental noise during daytime, earplugs may facilitate sleep during daylight hours.
8. Avoid unnecessary changes between day or night shifts (or working excessive overtime). Adjustment to new sleep-wake cycles commonly requires at least one week.