

Strategies to reduce the impact of working nights and help us sleep better

Our bodies are programmed to be active during the day and rest at night. This rhythm is determined by our biological clock. As a result, it is normal to find it hard to work at night and sleep during the day. However, when we understand how night shifts affect us, and apply certain adaptation strategies, we can manage to sleep well and enjoy a good quality of life.

No miracle strategy is right for everyone, because no two people are the same and individual situations are infinitely variable.

The key to coping better with working at night is to improve our sleep[1].

1. Do not cut back on sleep to make room for other activities or appointments.
2. Make sure you sleep the required number of hours (ideally seven or more in a 24-hour period).
3. Follow the same routine before going to bed (brushing your teeth, putting on your pyjamas, etc.).
4. Take naps, preferably at the same time each day
 - A nap of 20 minutes or 90 minutes about two hours before your shift
 - A nap of 15 to 20 minutes during the first half of your shift
5. Exercise regularly, but not within three hours before going to bed.
6. Eat a healthy diet and stay well hydrated
 - Avoid foods that are high in fat or refined sugar. This prevents weight gain and improves alertness during night shifts.
 - Do not consume stimulants (coffee, tea, cola or chocolate) in the second half of the shift.
 - Eat a light snack before going to bed to reduce the risk of hunger waking you up.
 - Avoid drinking liquids four hours before bedtime.
7. Get some light therapy 40 minutes before your shift[2].
8. Consume caffeine or take a prescription psychostimulant before your shift.
9. On the way home, if you feel sleepy, take public transportation or a taxi, because driving in this condition can put your life and the lives of others at risk. Wear sunglasses (orange) until it is time to go to bed[3] or to the bathroom to urinate, if needed.

WARNING: Wearing orange glasses while driving is not recommended, because red lights at traffic lights are difficult to see. Standard sunglasses would be more appropriate in this context, as long as they do not affect your alertness.

10. Use a sleep aid

- Melatonin (1 to 5 mg, as needed) can help you fall asleep; take it 30 minutes before going to bed.
- Prescription sleeping pills sometimes help, but are not very effective in the long term. Limit their use to two or three times a week.

11. Optimize your sleep environment to avoid being disturbed while sleeping during the day

- Wear an eye mask or use blackout curtains in your bedroom. Stay in the dark for the entire time you plan to sleep, whether or not you are sleeping. If you stay awake for a long time:
 - Get out of bed, sit in an armchair or on a chair and stay calm. Return to bed if you feel drowsy, or after about 20 minutes. Do not leave your bedroom.
- Set the temperature in the room to cool, if possible.
- Sleep in a bed and, if possible, in a room isolated from household activities.
- Wear earplugs or listen to white noise (a fan, for example).
- Avoid having pets in your bedroom.
- Switch off all ringers and notifications.
- Hang a sign on your bedroom door saying "I'm sleeping," if necessary.
- Ask the people around you to not disturb you while you are sleeping.

12. Eliminate sources of stress

- Practice a relaxation technique regularly.
- Write down the intrusive thoughts that prevent you from falling asleep.
- Adopt a positive attitude to sleep and to waking up when you don't want to.
- Avoid challenging games before bedtime.

13. If you suffer from chronic insomnia, try a non-pharmacological treatment for insomnia, such as a [Brief Behavioral Treatment for Insomnia \(BBT-I\)](#).

14. If you believe you have a sleep disorder, take a [sleep screening test](#).

15. Choose the right time to sleep (adapted to your personal situation)

Choice 1: Sleep mostly when you return home from work.

Choice 2: Sleep especially before going to work.

Choice 3: Divide your sleep between these two times.

Choice 1.

Sleep from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Preferred solution for night owls
and young adults.

Pros

- + You will fall asleep more easily and sleep longer if you go to bed early.
- + You will be available for family or social activities at suppertime and in the evening.

Cons

- You will be more tired during the night shift, as you will have been awake for several hours.
- You will have no time to unwind between work and sleep.
- You will not be available for your family in the morning.
- You will have little exposure to natural light in winter.

Recommendations

- Go to bed as soon as possible when you get home from work.
- Plan for at least seven hours of sleep.
- Avoid morning light by wearing dark or orange sunglasses.
- Get exposure to light (natural or artificial) in the late afternoon or evening.
- Sleep in the dark.

Choice 2.

Sleep from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m.
Good solution for early risers
and older people.

Pros

- + You will be better rested during your shift.
- + The transition to a daytime schedule will be easier.
- + You will have time to unwind between the end of your shift and bedtime.
- + You will be free in the morning and at lunchtime.

Cons

- You will be very tired after your night shift, as you will have been awake for a very long time.
- You may find it difficult to sleep well in the evening (conflict with your biological clock).
- You will not be available for family or social activities at suppertime and in the evening.

Recommendations

- Take a nap in the evening, before your night shift.
- Plan for seven hours of sleep.
- Get exposure to natural light in the morning.
- Sleep in the dark.

Choice 3.

Sleep from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m.
and 6 p.m. to 10 p.m.
Possible solution for people who
sleep for short periods of time.

Pros

- + This increases the amount of sleep you get each day.
- + You will be better rested at the beginning of your shift.
- + This makes it easier to switch shifts for rotating schedules (days-evenings-nights).
- + You will be available for family meals.

Cons

- You may find it difficult to sleep in the evening.
- You will feel as if you spent the day in bed.
- You will not be available for family or social activities in the evening.

Recommendations

- Keep to a regular sleep schedule, with rest periods of three or four consecutive hours.
- Aim for a minimum of seven hours of sleep per day.
- Avoid morning light by wearing dark or orange sunglasses.
- Get exposure to light (natural or artificial) in the afternoon.
- Sleep in the dark.

1. Marie Dumont, Ph. D. "Mieux vivre le travail de nuit," online interactive tool, Centre d'études avancées en médecine du sommeil (CÉAMS).
2. McGill University. "Reducing fatigue and errors among nurses working night shifts," 2024.
3. Daneault, V. (M.Sc., Ph.D.). (2024). "There are several orange glasses on the market, to make the right choice, you must make sure you can obtain a report which certifies that wavelengths between 460 and 480 nm are blocked." Center for Advanced Research in Sleep Medicine (CARSM).