

Workplace Health and Safety Queensland

Managing fatigue following natural disasters

What is fatigue?

Fatigue is defined as the increasing difficulty in performing mental and physical activities as a result of inadequate restorative sleep. It is a symptom, not a specific disorder or disease.

What causes fatigue?

The causes of fatigue are many and varied however topping the list is sleep loss and/or being awake for too long (greater than 17 hours).

Other causes include poor sleep quality, inadequate amount of sleep (less than seven hours), sustained effort, disruption to the body clock or circadian rhythms, inadequate rest breaks, emotional issues and the time of day work is performed.

DID YOU KNOW???

Being awake for 17 hours = a blood alcohol level of 0.05

Being awake for 20 hours = a blood alcohol level of 0.1

What can happen when workers are fatigued?

If workers do not get enough sleep, or are awake for too long and become fatigued, then it is difficult for them to stay alert and do their job safely.

Fatigue related errors increase the risk of having an accident or getting injured.

The consequences of fatigue include:

- decreased alertness

- slowed reaction time
- poor hand-eye coordination
- higher error rates
- reduced vigilance
- reduced decision-making ability
- poor judgement and risk assessment capability
- being easily distracted during complex tasks
- difficulty responding to emergencies
- inability to remember the sequence of events.

Who is responsible for managing fatigue?

Both workers and managers share the responsibility of managing fatigue.

It is the manager's responsibility to ensure that the work being performed (including rosters and working hours) does not put workers at risk of becoming fatigued.

It is the worker's responsibility to ensure that they use their time off wisely and get a sufficient amount of sleep.

How to identify if your workers are fatigued

Consider roster design and workload factors that can contribute to your workers fatigue risk. These include

- long working hours including shifts of 12 hours or more
- working through the night and early mornings
- backward rotating rosters which decrease the opportunity for sleep
- early start times (before 6am)



- performing critical and complex tasks during the early hours of the morning.

Look out for workers showing symptoms such as:

- **physical symptoms** - yawning, eye-rubbing, head drooping, unintentional sleep
- **mental symptoms** - difficulty concentrating on the current work task, lapses in attention, difficulty remembering what they are meant to be doing, failure to communicate important information to a colleague, failure to anticipate events or actions, unintentionally performing the task incorrectly, or omitting, forgetting or failing to complete a task properly.
- **emotional symptoms** - more quiet or withdrawn than normal, lethargic or lacking in energy, lacking in motivation to do the task well, or irritable or bad tempered behaviour with colleagues, family or friends.

How can I manage the risk of fatigue to my workers?

- Roster shifts so that workers are provided the opportunity for a continuous seven to eight hours sleep in each 24 hour period.

- Roster shifts so that workers are provided at least 50 hours sleep for every seven days.
- Rotate shifts forward rather than back.
- Limit number of consecutive night shifts to four.
- Finish night shifts by 8 am.
- Allow a minimum of 12 hours between consecutive shifts.
- Roster at least two full nights sleep after the last night shift.
- Provide frequent rest breaks during shifts
- Provide transport where possible to minimise the risks associated with commuting.
- Provide an area/room for workers to sleep before commuting home.
- Schedule safety critical and complex tasks during the daytime (when workers are most alert).
- Allow and encourage access to Employee Assistance Services as workers required.

For more information visit

www.worksafe.qld.gov.au or call the Workplace Health and Safety Infoline on 1300 369 915.

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