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Work and Fatigue in Wildland Firefighting

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In 1980 and 1989 the Missoula Technology and Development Center reviewed studies related to fatigue during extended firefighting operations. Since then, MTDC and others have completed additional studies. This report summarizes recent recommendations from laboratory and field studies.

Definitions:

Fatigue—A sense of tiredness, either mental or physical, brought on by stress (lack of sleep, physical work, nutritional inadequacies, or mental stresses). Fatigue following work or sleep deprivation is a normal state and can be reversed with adequate recovery or rest.

Accumulated (Chronic) Fatigue—Fatigue from which normal rest does not produce recovery. Accumulated fatigue is often caused by extended periods of stress with inadequate recovery periods, resulting in decreased productivity, compromised immune function, and reduced alertness.

Fatigued workers perform poorly and behave carelessly, tolerate greater errors, and become inattentive. They display decreased motivation, increased irritability and depression, and low morale. Accumulated fatigue is more persistent, producing a wider array of effects on performance, health, and morale than ordinary fatigue. Accumulated fatigue requires longer recovery periods than ordinary fatigue.

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