

The rewards and challenges of shift work.

As a member of a shift work family, you're

already aware of some of the pluses—

for example, the **extra pay** to provide

for the family, the freedom of working

nontraditional hours and the

ability to spend more **time with the**

kids during the day. 🕒 The minuses? 🕒

They include everything from **difficulty**

planning events and family activities

to sleep and **schedule disruptions**.

🕒 It not only affects the shift worker, but

everyone in the household.



Living with shift work.

When you live with a shift worker, you're a shift worker too. Their schedule interrupts your schedule. When they're up, you're up. When they're driving home late at night, you're up worried in bed. Or on the sofa. Chances are, you could use better quality sleep as much as your shift worker.

So what's wrong with losing sleep?

If you and your shift worker don't get enough sleep, it can result in everything from grumpiness to lowered immune systems, and even depression. It can also lead to something very dangerous—drowsy driving.

Make sure you and your loved one crash in the right spot.

Research shows that when you're driving under the strain of sleep deprivation, you're not going to react to situations as quickly as when you're rested and alert. The effect is almost like driving while impaired by alcohol or drugs. And there isn't a big warning sign that flashes every time you're about to fall asleep. Drowsiness creeps up on you. It's almost impossible to predict when you might doze off.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that more than 100,000 crashes each year are the result of drowsy driving. Some studies reveal that roughly one-quarter of shift workers reported having at least one crash or close call within the last year. So you can see why it's so critical for everyone to get quality sleep. People's lives are at stake.

When the shift worker loses sleep, it's a family affair.

It's not easy getting quality sleep when the shift worker in the family is coming home from work in the middle of the night or unwinding from a hard shift at three in the morning. Everybody's day (and night) is disturbed. And the whole household must work its schedule around the shift worker's waking and sleeping hours.

Some tips for the whole family to sleep on.

It's important that everybody gets the best quality sleep possible. It's also vital to talk on a regular basis about the challenges, frustrations and issues that come with being a shift work family. Here are a few steps that everybody can take to improve their sleep environment.

Keep the room dark. Really dark.

The body has its own natural waking/sleeping clock called the "circadian rhythm." This means a person wants to be active when it's light, and rest when it's dark. Here's what to do to keep everyone, including your shift worker, in the right sleep rhythm.

☞ **Use black-out or room-darkening shades.** They're made to completely eliminate outside





light, whether it's the natural light of the sun, or the glow of a street lamp. Also try putting lined curtains over the shades. You'll find them at most home supply centers or department stores.

☞ **Fix those light leaks.** The smallest amount of outside light can disturb sleep. Cover glow-in-the-dark alarm clocks with a hand towel, and switch off your nightlights. It may help to block out the shaft of light that leaks under the bedroom door by covering the opening with a rolled-up towel.

☞ **Wear a sleep mask.** It's not just for movie stars anymore. It's ideal for anyone who has trouble sleeping, because it keeps out any outside light—day or night. You'll find sleep masks at most drugstores.

Block out the “bad” sounds.

Honking cars. Screaming ambulances. Roaring airplanes. Noisy neighbors. Barking dogs. Trying to sleep soundly in the midst of life's daily and nightly sounds isn't easy. Fortunately, there are steps you can take to help the situation.

☞ **Use earplugs to block outside noise.** Few things are as simple to use or as effective at keeping out sleep-depriving distractions.

☞ **Purchase a “white noise” machine.** Studies show that shift workers and non-shift workers alike are often lulled to sleep by a steady stream of peaceful sounds, such as ocean waves. White noise machines block out extraneous, not-so-peaceful sounds. You'll find these machines at electronics or department stores.

☞ **Put them to sleep with a noisy old fan.** An old-fashioned oscillating fan is perfect. The new “whisper-quiet” fans don't do a very good job of blocking outside noise.

☞ **Tune in and fall out.** Tune your radio or TV to a channel in between stations—the “shhhh” will block out other noises. Just be sure to turn down the brightness or cover the screen so the light doesn't keep you awake.

Set the temperature.

Be sure to keep the sleeping room at a comfortable temperature—not too hot or too cold. Research shows that setting your thermostat to 60-65 degrees Fahrenheit is ideal.

Set your schedule.

Try to keep a regular sleep schedule—going to sleep and waking up at the same time every day, including weekends. It may not always be possible, but it's important—for the shift worker and everyone in the house.





Follow these healthy life habits and everybody will sleep better.

The task of getting better sleep is in our control. All it takes is the commitment and desire to live as healthy a life as possible, and the willingness to take a few simple steps.

☞ **Get everybody involved in a healthy diet and exercise program.** Good health has a positive effect on our ability to sleep. So eat healthy and exercise. Choose nutritious foods that are low in sodium and saturated fat. Pick an activity the whole family likes—such as walking, jogging, swimming or bicycling. And do it together—you're more likely to stick to it that way.

☞ **Avoid caffeine and alcohol close to bedtime.** Caffeine's stimulating effects will peak in two to four hours and may last for several hours afterward. The result is diminished deep sleep and increased awakenings. Alcohol may initially make you fall asleep faster, but when the immediate effects wear off, it deprives your body of deep rest and you end up sleeping in fragments and waking often.

☞ **Understand the side effects of medication.** Read the label. Some medications can make you sleepy and make it dangerous to drive. Other medications can make it harder to fall asleep.

☞ **Develop a relaxing sleep ritual.** Everyone has their own way to unwind. Here are a few suggestions the entire household can use:

- Take a warm bath, not a shower. The point is to relax, not just to get clean.

- Read until you feel sleepy.
- Listen to quiet, soothing music.
- Make a list of things you need to do or worry about the next day (or night), so you can clear your mind for sleep.

The better the communication, the happier the household.

The goal is to make the most of the time you spend together as a shift work family. So here are some tips everyone in the house can follow:

☞ **Hold regular family meetings, once or twice a week.**

- Discuss problems or concerns about the shift worker's schedule, or anything else that comes up. Open up the lines of communication.
- Try to deal with minor problems early on, before they become major problems.
- Determine solutions together as a family. Listen, and think about all ideas.

☞ **Keep household members in touch with the shift worker, and each other.**

- Set up a bulletin board in your house where everybody can leave notes, school work, drawings, photographs, cartoons, reminders, or anything else to help keep the family connected.



- Rent or purchase a camcorder to capture special moments the shift worker may miss, such as birthday parties, Little League games and school recitals.
- Select a time each week to relax and talk with your partner.
- Plan a “family day” once a month.
- Schedule family events and get-togethers on the shift worker’s days off when he/she is normally awake, such as breakfast or early lunch.

☞ *Ensure your family feels safe at night.*

Some research suggests that the safer people feel in their home environment, the better they sleep.

Here are some ideas:

- Install a home security system.
- Get a dog.
- Keep emergency phone numbers (i.e., 911, fire, police) handy by your bedside telephone.

Here’s to better sleep.

The benefits to getting better sleep include more patience with loved ones, better performance on the job and at school—and most critical of all—safer driving on the road. So get together regularly, talk about what works, and commit to making as many changes as possible.

The key is to be persistent, and to try as many tips as you can, for at least several weeks. Changing habits doesn’t work overnight. It takes time.

Everything you’ve read about here will lead to one common goal: achieving a better quality of life for the whole family.

