

FATIGUE

DID YOU KNOW?

Fatigue is defined as being in a state of physical or mental exhaustion, which compromises both workplace safety and a worker's ability to perform efficiently. Here are 7 statistics relating to fatigue in the workplace

1. There are three causes of fatigue: sleep loss, disruption of a person's body clock, and prolonged mental or physical activity.
2. Fatigue can reduce a worker's alertness, leading to errors and an increased possibility of injury under these two conditions: either when operating equipment or vehicles, or when performing important tasks requiring considerable concentration.
3. Seven long-term health effects of fatigue include increased risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, gastrointestinal disorders, diabetes, anxiety, depression, and reduced fertility. (Safe Work Australia)
4. A University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine study found that fatigued workers had nearly twice the risk for injury compared to non-fatigued workers.
5. Five symptoms indicating that a worker is experiencing fatigue include excessive yawning or falling asleep at work; impaired decision-making ability; short-term memory impairment and reduced concentration; slowed reflexes and reduced hand-eye coordination; and a noticeable decrease in one's ability to communicate clearly.
6. One major cause of fatigue is a work schedule that limits the amount of rest time a worker has before starting the next shift, because of issues such as overtime on the previous shift.
7. Three things supervisors can do to reduce fatigue among their workers are: allowing workers to vary their work tasks to avoid monotony; allowing workers to take short power-nap breaks, especially on the night shift; and encouraging workers to manage their fatigue risk factors. Risk factors include cutting sleep time short to complete tasks or to read, use a computer or watch TV, and consuming excessive nicotine, alcohol or caffeine, especially in the hours close to bedtime.

The Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (JOEM) published its Fatigue study and was the first study to examine the relationship between fatigue and health related lost, productive work-time (LPT) in the U.S workers.

Study Results

Based on the information gathered on the participants and from the researchers own interviews, they concluded the following:

- The estimated prevalence of fatigue in the U.S workforce for a two-week period was 37.9%.
- Fatigue was more prevalent in women, workers under age 50, while workers and workers earning more than \$30,000 per year in "high control" positions-that is, jobs with a lot of latitude in making decisions.
- Overall, 9.2% of U.S. workers with fatigue reported LPT specifically due to fatigue in the previous two weeks. Such workers lost an average of 4.1 productive work hours per week, most of which was reflected in reduced performance at work rather than absence from work performance primarily by impairing their concentration

and increasing the time it took them to complete tasks. Distracted workers are naturally more likely to have safety incidents.

Bottom line: The researchers estimated that workers with fatigue cost U.S employers \$136.4 billion per year in health-related LPT-\$101 billion more than workers without fatigue.

KEEP IN MIND

Workers suffering from fatigue—physical and mental—are not only less productive and more prone to illness but also more distracted and thus more likely to be involved in a safety incident.

Fatigue can be broadly defined as a feeling of weariness, tiredness or lack of energy. Fatigue is a common complaint but, medically speaking, it's recognized more as a symptom or cause of other conditions than as a condition itself. The best way to understand fatigue is along a continuum. On one end of the spectrum is the fatigue that most of us occasionally experience in the course of our lives when we get physically or mentally overburdened. This kind of fatigue isn't serious and can usually be resolved simply and quickly, such as by getting extra rest. On the other end is a less common but more serious form of fatigue that's symptomatic of a more chronic and disabling condition, such as major depressive disorder or chronic fatigue syndrome. This form of fatigue is an acute and/or ongoing state of tiredness that leads to mental or physical exhaustion and prevents people from functioning as usual.

Fatigue clearly impairs work ability. Studies have shown that workers with fatigue are significantly more likely to miss work and experience long-term work absences than workers without fatigue

You're an accident waiting to happen if you are not alert at work. This applies to most high-risk jobs, trucking and transport jobs, repetitive jobs, such as sorting logs in a lumber mill, and a host of other jobs - regardless of the inherent risk level.

THE DANGERS

The risk of making mistakes at work increases dramatically if workers sleep for less than seven to eight hours or are awake for more than 17 consecutive hours.

- Fatigue reduces your ability to make decisions and to do complex planning.
- Communication skills and your ability to respond to and remember directions and recall details also suffer.
- Fatigue slows your reaction time, and your ability to respond to changes in surroundings or information provided.
- It also shortens your attention span, especially during boring or mundane tasks.
- Fatigue lowers your productivity and performance and your ability to handle stress.
- It makes it hard to stay awake, increases forgetfulness and increases errors in judgment.

Experiencing one or more of these factors can make you dangerous to work with, because it increases the chances for incidents and injuries.

Electricity, toxic chemicals, bone-crushing machines, fall hazards and fire are just some of the dangers the 20th century workplace health and safety programs were designed to root out.

The safety program of the new millennium must deal not just with these old enemies but new threats that are still not fully recognized or understood—**Ergonomics, Workplace Violence, Mental Stress and What May Be the Newest of the Newfangled Hazards—Fatigue.**