

# Safety Topic of the Month

## Fatigue in the Workplace

*Info taken from The National Safety Council and The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety*

Nearly everyone has experienced tiredness and an inability to function at an optimal level. You may not realize just how much fatigue puts you and those around you at risk. Fatigue describes a physical, mental or social impairment that includes tiredness, sleepiness, reduced energy and increased effort needed to perform tasks at a desired level.

Nearly 4 out of 10 employees in the U.S. suffer from sleep loss. People most at risk for fatigue and fatigue-related incidents include:

- Shift workers, especially those working night shift, rotating shifts, long hours or with early morning start times
- Workers who perform a task for extended periods or repeatedly perform a tedious task
- Individuals with untreated sleep disorders such as obstructive sleep apnea
- Parents and caregivers of young children
- People taking certain medications that interfere with sleep

### **Is Fatigue a Workplace Issue?**

Some research studies have shown that when workers have slept for less than 5 hours before work or when workers have been awake for more than 16 hours, their chance of making mistakes at work due to fatigue are significantly increased.

Research has shown that the number of hours awake can be similar to blood alcohol levels. WorkSafeBC reports the following:

- 17 hours awake is equivalent to a blood alcohol content of 0.05
- 21 hours awake is equivalent to a blood alcohol content of 0.08
- 24-25 hours awake is equivalent to a blood alcohol content of .10

## **Effects of Fatigue while at Work.**

Since fatigue cannot be measured, it is difficult to separate the effects of long working hours or lack of sleep to any changes in accident or injury rates.

However, studies report the effects of fatigue as:

- Reduced decision making ability.
- Reduced ability to do complex planning.
- Reduced communication skills.
- Reduced productivity / performance.
- Reduced attention and vigilance.
- Reduced ability to handle stress on the job.
- Reduced reaction time - both in speed and thought.
- Loss of memory or the ability to recall details.
- Failure to respond to changes in surroundings or information provided.
- Unable to stay awake (e.g., falling asleep while operating machinery or driving a vehicle).
- Increased tendency for risk-taking.
- Increased errors in judgment.
- Increased sick time, absenteeism, rate of turnover.
- Increased medical costs.
- Increased accident rates.

## **How the Workplace can fight Fatigue.**

Fatigue is increased by:

- Dim lighting.
- Limited visual acuity (i.e., due to weather).
- High temperatures.
- High noise.
- High comfort.
- Tasks which must be sustained for long periods of time.
- Work tasks which are long, repetitive, paced, difficult, boring and monotonous.

Workplaces can help by providing environments which have good lighting, comfortable temperatures, and reasonable noise levels. Work tasks should provide a variety of interest and tasks should change throughout the shift.

If extended hours/overtime are common, remember to consider the time required to commute home, meal preparation, eating, socializing with family, etc. Workplaces may wish to consider providing on-site accommodations, prepared meals for workers and facilities where employees can take a nap before they drive home.