

Managing and Mitigating Fatigue: Tips and Tools for Nurses

Purpose:

This Tips and Tools guide is designed to assist you to better understand and learn how to prevent and manage fatigue in your work environment.

The information is based on the **RNAO Healthy Work**

Environment Best Practice Guideline: Preventing and Mitigating Nurse Fatigue in Health Care.

Why is this important?:

This topic is of importance to nurses as evidence suggests that long hours and shift work contribute to nurse fatigue and is linked to patient safety. The effects of fatigue can impair job performance and is closely associated with tardiness, absenteeism, staff turnover and decreased performance. Fatigue may also endanger both nurses and others on the road during commutes to and from work. These effects have a potential impact on recruiting and retaining nursing staff and demonstrate the need for initiatives to support the individual, organization and the healthcare system to manage and mitigate fatigue in nurses.

The results of a joint CNA/RNAO national research study (2010) of more than 7000 RNs representing all sectors of health care indicated that:

- Nurses working 12.5 hours or longer are found to be 3 times more likely to make an error.
- Of the 7,000 nurses polled, 80% feel tired after work.
- Of the 7,000 polled, 55% feel they are “almost always” tired at work.
- On average, nurses work more than 40 hours a week.
- During a 28-day study, every nurse involved worked at least one overtime shift.
- Two out of 3 nurses work 10 or more overtime shifts in 28 days.



Facts:

Fatigue:

- It is the body's response to sleep deprivation or prolonged physical or mental exertion.
- Is a subjective feeling ranging from tiredness and weariness to exhaustion.
- Results in a loss of energy and reduction in work performance.
- Affects the ability to concentrate and react to sudden emergent situations.

Fatigue is not:

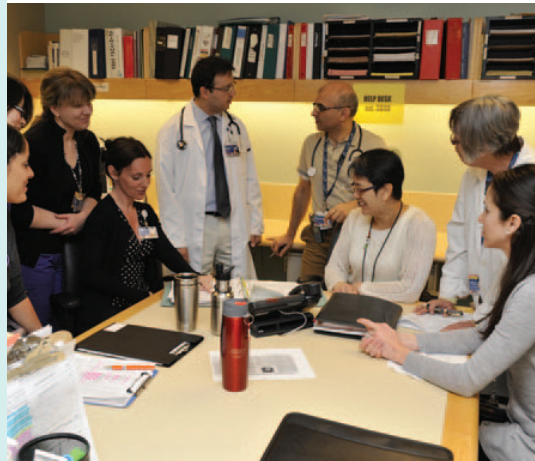
- Sleepiness, which is the tendency to fall asleep (Lerman , Eskan, Flower et. Al 2012).
- Burnout, but contributes to burnout which is conceptualized as a work related condition.

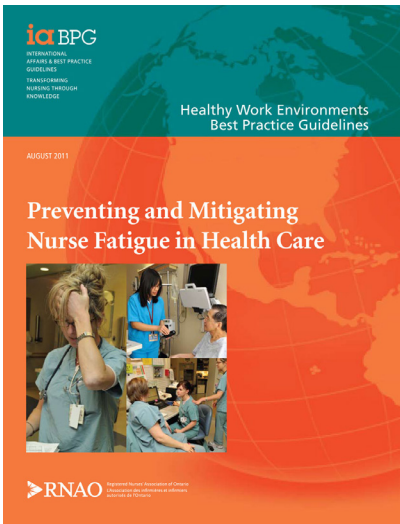
What causes fatigue? The main cause is lack of sleep.

- It is influenced by many factors including:
 - work demands, the time of day that you work
 - frequent shift rotation
 - stress
 - sleepiness
 - compassion fatigue
 - emotional exhaustion
 - pattern of work, sleep habits, quality of sleep

Tips for work:

- Assess yourself prior to starting work for energy level, alertness, memory.
- Assess yourself during work for alertness, memory , decision-making ability, judgement, effective communication.
- Ask for assistance in decision-making and safety checks, if feeling fatigued.
- Alert your supervisor or manager if you're feeling fatigued.
- Ensure adequate recovery time between scheduled work periods.
- Take entitled breaks and support colleagues to do the same.
- During the work period, find short periods to stretch, change your pace, carry out breathing exercises, engage in humour.
- Limit overtime, and assess for fatigue level before accepting additional shifts.
- Communicate shift preference where there are known personal impacts related to specific shift patterns.
- On your scheduled break, leave your immediate work environment; take a power nap, if possible.





Link to the full version of this guideline

www.RNAO.ca/bpg/fatigue

Tips for the team:

- Openly discuss, and acknowledge fatigue as a critical aspect of a culture of safety.
- Establish team norms to avoid negative impacts of fatigue:
 - ask for help
 - support each other
 - advocate for quiet spaces in your work environment

Tips for sleeping:

- Maintain the same sleep/work/leisure time sequence on days off regardless of the shift worked.
- Get a minimum of 6 to 8 hours of uninterrupted sleep.
- Sleep in a comfortable and completely darkened room to simulate the night.
- Practice relaxation techniques which can reduce stress i.e. breathing techniques, soothing music.

Tips for self-care:

- Make getting enough sleep a priority.
- Participate in a physical activity consistent with your health and lifestyle i.e. yoga, running, walking, and swimming.
- Schedule your physical activity with a colleague or friend.
- Pay attention to your body cues and learn to recognize when you need special time/activity for yourself to regenerate.
- Monitor yourself for health issues, i.e. depression, irritability, difficulty sleeping, digestive problems, physical aches and report these to your health-care provider.
- Avoid medications that make you sleepy.

Tips for diet:

- Keep a regular eating schedule; establish a routine that is appropriate for the time frame you work.
- Include an adequate intake of fluids.
- Prepare healthy portable snacks, i.e. cut vegetables, fruits, nuts.
- Maintain a balanced and nutritious diet. Avoid a high protein, high fat meal just before going to bed.
- Limit intake of stimulants such as caffeine, sugar and avoid caffeine for five hours before bedtime.
- Set aside at least one meal or activity per day with family or friends to avoid social isolation.

Tool to Assess Fatigue

This is an evidence-based checklist for healthcare providers' personal education and selfassessment to help you manage fatigue. Some of these fatigue factors are objective (indicated with an (O)) and can be assessed by peers and managers. Research has shown that a person can recover from sleep deprivation after two consecutive nights of 6-8 hours sleep, even after several days of working 12-hours. Consider that evidence as you complete the checklist. Recall your most recent work experience, and then circle each factor that applies to your current situation:

Fatigue Risk Factor: My Schedule Included:		
Yes	No	More than 12.5 concurrent hours in a 24 hour period. (O)
Yes	No	More than my scheduled hours in the past 48-72 hours. (O) <i>(Overtime is defined as a worked shift/actual hours worked as exceeding scheduled hours, whether voluntary or mandated.)</i>
Yes	No	More than 40 hours in the week. (O)
Yes	No	On-call" hours during which I returned to work for patient care. (O) <i>On-call hours are an addition to regularly scheduled hours and may result in overtime, evening or night shift work, weekend hours, and significantly increase the total number of hours worked each week.)</i>
Yes	No	An evening or night shift. (O)
Yes	No	Returned to work after fewer than 10 hours off since my last shift. (O)

Fatigue Risk Factor: My Work Style Involved:		
Yes	No	Work without breaks. (O)
Yes	No	Work at a high pace. <i>(Work pace is the speed at which decisions and nursing assessments are made and actions are planned.)</i>
Yes	No	Experience of psychological strain while at work. <i>(Psychological strain includes emotional demands of work, mental effort, and relationships with peers and/or supervisors.)</i>
Yes	No	Work when I was scheduled OFF. (O)

Fatigue Risk Factor: My Sleep Issues Included:		
Yes	No	Difficulty staying awake while at work.
Yes	No	Falling asleep during work.
Yes	No	Difficulty staying awake while driving home from work.
Yes	No	Sleeping fewer than 6-7 hours before returning to work.

Fatigue Risk Factor: My Personal Life was Affected by:		
Yes	No	Working while sick in the past few days.
Yes	No	Experience of mood changes at work.
Yes	No	Working more than 1 job.