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Reducing the Risk of Fatigue at Workplaces

Over recent years new patterns of work have emerged due to developing technology, more sophisticated mechanisation and changing demands.

Examples of these new patterns of work include 24 hour operation, contracted work and employees having more than one job.

This document recognises that while fatigue is not a new hazard it needs to be included as a hazard relevant to today's workplaces.

Meaning of Fatigue

Fatigue is a general term used to describe the feeling of being tired, drained or exhausted. Fatigue may be due to mental, physical or emotional reasons. It may affect the ability of an employee to carry out their duties in a safe manner. For example, fatigue has been identified as a major factor in transport accidents. Where fatigue may affect a person's ability to work safely it must be identified, assessed and controlled like other hazards in the workplace.

Fatigue can be caused by many factors in the workplace or a person's private life. Often a number of factors combine to increase fatigue to the point where a person may put



their own or another person's safety at risk. As a result, both employers and employees have a role to play in making sure any risks associated with fatigue are minimised.

Circadian Rhythms (the "Body Clock") are the body's natural rhythms that are repeated approximately every 24 hours. These rhythms regulate sleeping patterns, body temperature, hormone levels, digestion and many other functions. Depending on the time of the day, the body is programmed for varying levels of wakefulness, body temperature, and so on.

Work schedules that require people to be awake and active at an inappropriate time in the cycle, or working for extended periods, cause disruptions to the body clock. These disruptions adversely impact on the quality and quantity of sleep, adversely impact on task performance and may also create a sense of personal dislocation and imbalance.

Causes of Fatigue

Fatigue can result from a number of factors in the workplace or a person's private life. Examples from the workplace include:

- long or arduous work;
- physical requirements of the job;
- irregular and unpredictable working hours;
- time of day when work is performed and sleep obtained;
- mental stimulation of the job;
- continual noise exposure;
- poor workplace ventilation, lighting and design;
- workplace climate eg too hot or cold;
- continual vibration from equipment;
- constant concentration on a fixed or moving point;
- shiftwork;
- excessive work schedules; and
- having more than one job.

Fatigue levels can also be influenced by health and emotional issues or by several of these factors in combination.

Causes of fatigue can be identified by looking for signs and tracking down the causes.

Open communication between employers and employees is necessary to help identify fatigue in the workplace.



Effects of Fatigue

The most common effects associated with fatigue are;

- desire to sleep;
- lack of concentration;
- temporary memory loss;
- slowed reaction times;
- irritability;
- headaches and general body aches;
- mood swings;
- reduced physical strength and capabilities;
- reduced eye-hand coordination;
- poor judgement; and
- effects to general health and well being such as loss of appetite and weight and reduced immunity



There are a few indicators that show a person is tired and needs to sleep, such as:

- drowsy relaxed feeling;
- blurred vision;
- difficulty keeping eyes open;
- excessive head nodding;
- excessive yawning; and
- repeatedly moving off track if driving vehicles and plant.

An employer may identify fatigue by the following:

- increased employee irritability;
- increased errors by the employee;
- falling asleep at work; and
- increased employee absenteeism.

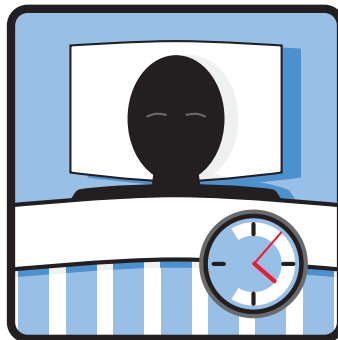
Requirements Under OSH Legislation

The *Occupational Safety and Health Act* sets out requirements for various parties in the workplace including employers and employees. Employers have a duty to provide and maintain a work environment where employees are not exposed to hazards. This includes determining how severe any injury can be and the risk of that injury occurring. This process is aided by the adoption of a systematic approach to identifying, assessing and controlling hazards at work. Employers must identify factors in the workplace that cause fatigue (a number of which are listed in the next section) and implement strategies to manage fatigue.

If the risks are significant, they must put in place controls to minimise them. This includes providing safe systems of work, information, training and supervision. The training should include information on what fatigue is, how it occurs and how to identify, effectively manage and control fatigue. Guidance is provided under the next section on the set of strategies an employer can implement as part of a fatigue management plan.

Employees should take reasonable care for their own safety and health. They should also avoid adversely affecting the safety and health of others in the workplace.

Employees also have an obligation to ensure that they are able to perform their duties in a safe manner without presenting a risk to themselves or others. For example, employees should make sure they get enough sleep, if lack of sleep could put themselves or others at risk while at work.



Factors that may contribute to and increase the risk of fatigue

Employers and employees need to consider factors that may contribute to a person being fatigued while at work. This checklist identifies a number of these factors. The checklist may need to be modified to be appropriate for the workplace in which it is being used. Any such document must be developed in consultation between employees and employers.

If a number of “yes” boxes are ticked, control strategies may need to be implemented to reduce the risk of accidents occurring from fatigue.

Risk Factors	
The Environment	
	Continual noise exposure
	Poor workplace design
	Continual vibration from equipment
	Extreme temperatures
	No external stimuli
	Working in isolation
	No means of early identification of signs of fatigue
	Poor ventilation
	Involves movement of vehicles eg forklifts
	Poor lighting
The Task	Physically demanding
	Irregular and unpredictable hours
	Requires concentration
	Involves the operation of machinery or plant
	Repetitive
	Duration of jobs or long hours
The Person	Other commitments such as family, social and financial
	Recent illness or injury
	Other work or job

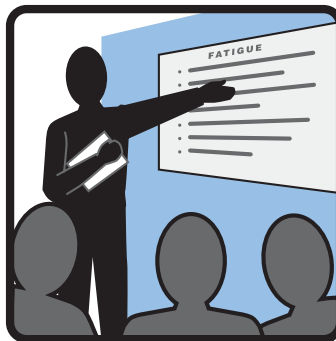
Strategies to Manage Fatigue in the Workplace

Controlling fatigue in the workplace requires cooperation between employers and employees. Prevention is the best form of control, but is not always possible due to the number of factors that can cause fatigue. Not all of these factors are work related.

Good management practices can assist in identifying fatigue. Employers have a duty to provide a workplace where, so far as is practicable, employees are not exposed to hazards. Adopting a systematic approach to identifying, assessing and controlling hazards at work can be assisted by:

- providing safe systems of work;
- information, instruction, training and supervision; and
- consultation and cooperation.

Each workplace is unique and should identify strategies addressing fatigue that are appropriate for that workplace. These strategies should be designed and managed in consultation with employees and safety and health representatives.



A fatigue management system involves a number of strategies that may include:

Safe Systems of work

- **Scheduling work flow**
Make sure there are adequate rest periods so employees do not experience fatigue. Ensure work schedules, workload and timelines are manageable. Being on call

and taking work home on top of normal duties should be assessed to determine whether people are working excessive hours.

- **Rostering of employees**

Define the task, select the people best suited to meet required outputs and ensure that where possible, shifts are rotated and sufficient time off is provided between shifts to allow for adequate quality of life. This includes designing or rotating jobs and tasks where practical along with recognising potentially stressful tasks. Ensure adequate breaks are provided in suitable facilities, if available, so that the employee is away from the workstation. Further information on workplace amenities can be obtained from the WorkSafe Western Australia Commission Code of Practice entitled *First Aid, Workplace Amenities and Personal Protective Equipment*.

- **Presenting for work**

Ensure employees are able to work safely. Employees should be made aware that factors in their personal life can impact on their level of fatigue and their capacity to work safely. The safety of those around them can also be affected. If an employee is fatigued, they should notify their employer who will need to introduce temporary measures to manage the risk of injury until the employee has recovered.

- **Health**

An employee's health and fitness are contributing factors to the level of fatigue. The employer might provide healthy lifestyle information to encourage and promote personal health and fitness of employees, and provide support for work related problems. It may also be beneficial to offer confidential support for emotional and family problems. (See training and education).

- **Responsibilities**

An effective fatigue management system should define and communicate responsibilities. Everyone needs to be aware of and practice his or her responsibilities.

- **Documentation and records**

Work schedules, rosters and records of hours worked should be documented and retained for a reasonable period as part of good management practice.

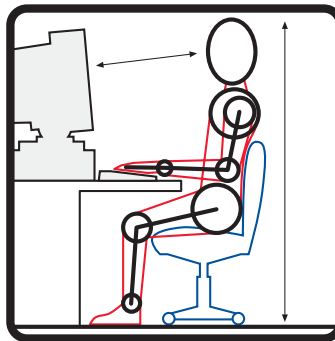
- **Incident management**

Fatigue should be considered as a contributory factor when investigating incidents. The results of all investigations should be recorded and assessed to identify unsafe practices and changes made to facilitate the prevention of future injury and damage.

Safe environment

- **Workplace conditions**

Safe and suitable workplace conditions help to reduce fatigue. This includes having equipment and facilities designed to Australian



Standards that meet the requirements of the Occupational Safety and Health Act. It involves designing the workplace to ensure adequate lighting, ventilation and the correct equipment to perform tasks. Workstations should be designed so the employee's posture doesn't induce fatigue. Special consideration should be given to the impact of environmental factors such as extreme heat or cold, tasks requiring high degrees of concentration, monotony or highly stressful situations

Training and Information

- **Training and education**

Employers must ensure employees have the skills and competence to perform their tasks safely.

Training on the issue of fatigue to employees, should incorporate:

- the meaning of fatigue;
- how to identify fatigue;
- how to manage fatigue;
- the workplace's system for managing fatigue;
- the responsibilities of employees in the workplace's system; and
- general health and lifestyle issues.

Training records should be retained.

Information for Employees

Lifestyle choices may result in insufficient sleep and can adversely impact on an individual's work performance the next day. Employees can help address fatigue in the workplace by:

1. Planning social activities so that adequate time for sleep is scheduled;
2. Being aware of the signs of fatigue;
3. Helping to identify the problem in the workplace.
4. Cooperating with employers and being supportive of employees trying to control fatigue;
5. Seeking confidential help with emotional and family problems that may be contributing to fatigue; and
6. Employing simple strategies that can help a person feeling fatigued to be refreshed.

An employee may identify fatigue by the following:

- not feeling refreshed after sleep;
- a greater tendency to fall asleep while at work;
- more frequent naps during leisure hours;
- feeling tired or sleepy;
- increased irritability;
- extended periods of sleep during days off; and
- increased errors and loss of concentration at work.





Further information

Further information can be obtained from:

The Chamber of Commerce and Industry
180 Hay Street
EAST PERTH WA 6000
Tel.: 9365 7555
Email: info@cciwa.com

UnionsWA
Level 4
79 Stirling Street
PERTH WA 6000
Tel.: 9328 7877
Email: unionswa@tlcwa.org.au

WorkSafe
Department of Consumer and Employment Protection
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**WorkSafe
Western
Australia
COMMISSION**

October 2001

ISBN 0-7307-7604-2

Comprehensive work safety and health
information can be found at:

www.docep.wa.gov.au