

Toolbox Safety Talks

Working hours

SafeWork SA
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Talk about safety at work

Take ten minutes at 10am, or at any other time of the day, to talk with your team about workplace safety. This training resource is designed to help you deliver short presentations covering a series of work health and safety topics.

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Here is an example of a working hours incident.

A worker died on his way to work when his car crashed into a safety barrier on the freeway. There was no evidence of the brakes being applied before the car crashed. The young man was employed by two security companies. After finishing a seven-hour shift, he had a five-hour break before starting a 12.5-hour night shift which finished at 6.30am. The incident occurred as he was on his way to another three-hour shift with only a three-hour break in between.

ASK THE QUESTION

What factors contributed to the incident?

Possible answers:

- *lack of sleep*
- *fatigue*
- *loss of concentration*
- *insufficient recovery times between shifts.*

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You have identified some of the risk factors in working long hours. Sleep disturbance and fatigue are the health risks most commonly associated with long working hours.

But it isn't always about the length of time we spend working. There is a complex relationship between working hours and fatigue. There are different forms of fatigue affecting mind and body.

- **Performance fatigue** affects speed, reaction time and skills. Work involving repetitive movements, frequent manual handling or physically demanding tasks can lead to fatigue, which can cause muscle or soft tissue injuries.
- **Mental fatigue** affects vigilance, judgement, mood, decision-making and communication. High concentration or mentally demanding work can lead to fatigue, work-related stress and increased risks associated with making critical decisions.
- **Increased exposure to other hazards** like noise, hazardous substances and vibration may also lead to fatigue.

It is difficult to generalise and pinpoint specific hours or working arrangements that lead to the risk of fatigue. Different factors contribute, such as the job, industry or work culture, and individual factors like age and state of health.

Workplace health and safety is everyone's responsibility

A Person Conducting a Business or Undertaking (PCBU) has a duty of care under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2012 (SA)* to provide a safe workplace and systems of work, information, instruction, training and an opportunity for workers to consult about work health and safety. In relation to working hours this would include:

- **Identifying hazards** associated with our environment at work, working hours and the sort of work we do, then assessing the risks associated with these hazards. For example, if workers are working long shifts, an incident is more likely to occur. You should be told what tasks are expected to be completed at what stage in the shift.
- **Ensuring there are policies in place about working arrangements**, such as working multiple jobs, breaks between shifts, maximum hours worked before a break and maximum overtime hours worked.
- **Ensuring there is instruction on the effects of working long hours**, such as how to manage sleep when doing shift work, the risks of coming to work tired, lifestyle choices, fatigue indicators and management.
- **Looking at the level of supervision**, especially at the end of shifts.
- **Giving workers the opportunity to discuss and negotiate suitable hours and working arrangements.** Consultation between PCBUs, workers, health and safety representatives and committees is an important part of the risk management process. This helps to identify hazards before any injury, illness or incident occurs, and to then develop measures to eliminate or reduce the associated risks.

As workers, we have a responsibility to ensure our own health and safety, and that of others affected by our work. We should be aware of our responsibilities and that our lifestyle and individual choices (such as second jobs) may contribute to fatigue and impaired performance.

We can help address working hours and fatigue at our workplace by:

- planning social activities so there is adequate time for sleep
- being aware of the signs of fatigue
- helping to identify any working hours issues in the workplace
- co-operating with and being supportive of colleagues trying to control fatigue
- seeking confidential help with emotional and family problems that may be contributing to fatigue
- using simple strategies that can help a fatigued person be refreshed
- seeking professional advice if health matters (e.g. poor diet, recent illness, injury or sleep disorders) may be contributing to fatigue.

ASK THE QUESTION

Before I finish, is there anything that we could be doing better in this workplace to prevent manual handling problems?

Take notes about suggestions ... don't panic if there aren't any takers!

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OK, unless anyone has any questions, thanks for participating.