

Long Working Hours- Workplace Fatigue

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Intro:

The shortage of healthcare workers has created an emerging problem within long-term care facilities. While more and more qualified healthcare workers have left the industry, the demand for caregivers has only increased. Many long-term care facilities have resorted to using temporary agencies over the last few years. For many organizations, Temporary Agencies were a short-term solution, for what was thought to be a short-term problem. But the future of long term care facilities looks extremely challenging.

Organizations are working on methods to reduce and/or eliminate the use of Temporary Agencies. Organizations are working on developing creative solutions to achieve these goals including increased overtime and hours-based incentives. While overtime opportunities fulfill an immediate need, they are not a sustainable for long-term goals. Continuously working overtime hours has proven to have negative implications on workers. This effect is called workplace fatigue. The long-term care environment can already be one with a demanding pace and be emotionally draining. When you add workplace fatigue into the equation, it can become harder for employees to make decisions which can result in workplace injuries, illnesses, and incidents involving patients. If these conditions continue over time, they can result in employee burnout which is the largest contributing factor in the healthcare worker shortage we face today. This leads to the question; How many hours creates workplace fatigue?

OSHA & DOL:

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Department of Labor (DOL) do not currently have standards or regulations that define how many hours healthcare workers are allowed to work. However, this is something that is on both organizations' radars. In July 2016, OSHA released a letter of interpretation discussing the hazards of workplace fatigue. "OSHA has long been aware of the hazards of sleep deprivation from working night shifts and has addressed this serious issue in public forums. OSHA has also issued citations to companies when they ignored the human factor of employee fatigue from excessive overtime." (July 12, 2016 Sleep-deprivation and fatigue hazards for night shift workers). OSHA cited workplaces

Editor's Note:

The KING Safety Matters newsletter is published quarterly to provide general safety information. It is not a substitute for adequate safety training, or intended to provide complete safety information or training, on any specific subject. The information contained herein is intended to assist safety efforts, and increase safety awareness.

In order to ensure the contents of the newsletter are helpful and important to you, please feel free to send comments, suggestions and feedback to:

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that do not take precautions to protect their employees from sleep-related hazards under the General Duty Clause .

OSHA released a publication titled *Long Work Hours, Extended or Irregular Shifts, and Worker Fatigue* which explains how fatigue affects the human body in different ways. Studies have shown the following health conditions linked to fatigue; Heart Disease, Digestive Problems, Musculoskeletal Disorders, Reproductive Problems, Depression, and Breast and Prostate Cancer. There have also been studies that have shown workplace fatigue can worsen pre-existing chronic diseases like diabetes and epilepsy.

Other Notable takeaways from the publication are:

- Worker fatigue increases the risk of illnesses and injuries
- Accident and injury rates are 18% greater during evening shifts and 30% greater during night shifts when compared to day shifts
- Research indicates that working 12 hours per day is associated with a 37% increased risk of injury

([https://www.osha.gov/worker-fatigue/hazards Long Work Hours, Extended or Irregular Shifts, and Worker Fatigue](https://www.osha.gov/worker-fatigue/hazards/Long-Work-Hours,-Extended-or-Irregular-Shifts,-and-Worker-Fatigue))

Case Study:

Some of the concerns that contribute to workplace fatigue are: Working double shifts, night shift followed by a day shift, and skipping weekends. Additionally, fatigue only increases as the shift goes on. It rarely, if ever, reduces due to sleep being the primary way to combat fatigue.

Additionally, when workers pick up hours, this greatly reduces the time for rest between shifts. For example, if an employee works 6 a.m.- 2 p.m. (picks up a double) 2 p.m.- 10 p.m., then the employee only has 8 hours to recover for their shift the next day. If fatigue were to set in during the double shift, then there would be a high probability that workplace fatigue would not go away in the allowed time off and would transfer over to their shift the next morning. On average most adults need at least 7 hours sleep to feel fully rested. The 8 hours off work is not enough time for the worker to travel from work/home, get rested, and complete other activities of daily living.

The Department of Transportation (DOT) is a great case study on the restrictions placed on the number of hours employees can work. In 24 hours, drivers are only allowed to work 14 of the hours and have a mandatory 10 hours off. This was put into place to combat workplace fatigue & reduce workplace accidents. The 10 hours off give employees enough time to adequately rest and take care of themselves.



Conclusion:

Caregivers are tasked with the responsibility of helping older adults carry out the most basic activities of daily life and Employers have an obligation to provide a safe and healthy work environment for their employees. Steps to reduce workplace fatigue should be taken by employers to reduce or eliminate known and anticipated hazards.

Presently, OSHA standards do not regulate extended and unusual shifts in the workplace. However, Employers can determine a safe standard for their employees by creating Overtime Policies and Procedures limiting employees from working too many hours. Follow the preventative steps that the Department of Transportation has taken to reduce workplace incidents by limiting employees to working a maximum of 14 hours a day with 10 hours off in between shifts. Steps should be taken to ensure employees cannot work a 12-hour shift and pick up a double after. Because this creates a dangerous situation and does not take into account human factor conditions. The average adult needs at least 7 hours of sleep. Employees need to be able to have adequate rest between shifts for optimal performance. Employers can't verify that employees rest in their time off, but they can make sure that there is enough time for employees to adequately rest between shifts.

Long working hours and irregular working hours have negative employee safety implications. Workplace fatigue has been linked to many health conditions. Workplace fatigue also increases the probability of workplace incidents. These incidents vary from injury, and illness, to patient safety. Take steps to protect your organization's employees by limiting the number of overtime hours that employees are allowed to take on.

