

# Fatigue



Make sure you know the risks to safety at work so you and your colleagues remain safe.



## Working when fatigued can present serious health and safety risks

Fatigue is a state of mental and/or physical exhaustion, which reduces a person's ability to perform work safely and effectively. Fatigue can be caused by:



working excessive hours – overtime and on-call work



mentally or emotionally demanding work



high job demands



shift work patterns and night work



long commuting times, both during work and driving to and from work



physically demanding or monotonous work



poor sleeping and other lifestyle factors

Nurses and midwives have obligations to manage their fatigue under the Work Health & Safety (WHS) Act and the Nursing & Midwifery Board's *Code of Conduct*.

All nurses and midwives can refuse **unreasonable** overtime that creates a risk to health and safety. Public sector nurses have this inclusion detailed in their Award.

## How is it a risk to health and safety?

Fatigue reduces alertness, which may lead to errors and an increase in incidents and injuries. Studies show that working fatigued causes impairment, similar to that experienced when drinking alcohol. After 17-19 hours without sleep, performance effects in the workplace are the equivalent to those of someone with a 0.5 blood alcohol level and, after longer periods of no sleep, those performance effects are equivalent to 1.0<sup>1</sup>. Nurses and midwives would never attend work drunk, so you shouldn't work fatigued.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1739867/>

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Effects of fatigue can be short term or long term. Short term effects include things like:

- short term memory problems and an inability to concentrate
- reduced capacity to engage in effective interpersonal communication
- impaired decision-making and judgement
- reduced hand-eye coordination or slow reflexes
- falling asleep while driving home
- increased stress, reduced capacity to cope

The longer-term health effects of fatigue can include:

- heart disease
- diabetes
- high blood pressure
- gastrointestinal disorders
- lower fertility
- anxiety and depression.

## What can be done to manage the risks of fatigue?

Your employer has an obligation to ensure your safety at work. This includes doing everything reasonably practicable to make sure you are not exposed to risks arising from working fatigued.

Your employer must consult you and your health and safety representatives (if any) when deciding how to manage the risks of fatigue.

Your employer should take the following steps:

### 1. IDENTIFY THE HAZARD

Your employer has a legal obligation to identify the potential for work related fatigue to become a health and safety issue. Sources where fatigue can be identified include:

- through consultation with staff and their representatives
- review of shift arrangements, rosters, records of hours work and overtime

- considering workers' commute periods, both requirements of commuting for work activities and commuting to and from home
- regularly assessing workloads
- work health and safety incidents and reports
- staff/patient complaints

### 2. ASSESS THE RISK

Your employer must consider the likelihood of fatigue causing harm to both staff and patients as well as how severe that harm could be. Do control measures exist and are they adequate?

Particular consideration should be given to those who regularly work overtime, are on-call, have lengthy distances to commute or have disclosed they have secondary employment or a health condition that may impact their wellbeing.

### 3. CONTROL THE RISK

Your employer must do everything reasonably practicable to eliminate the risks associated with fatigue. This may include:

- ensuring there are enough staff to prevent reliance on overtime to fill the regular roster
- having nurse to patient ratios to minimise work overload
- ensuring roster patterns are designed to minimise fatigue risks
- implementing a fatigue management policy for the prevention and management of fatigue-related risks
- regular reviews of incident recording and reporting processes to identify risk factors that indicate fatigue
- providing transport home after extensive overtime

### 4. REVIEW

Your employer must review the controls that have been put in place to manage the risks of fatigue to make sure they are effective. You should be consulted as part of this review.

## What can I do if I believe that there are fatigue related risks to my health and safety at work?



1. **Raise your concerns** through the normal channels in your workplace. Be sure to do this in writing. This may include things like putting in an incident report (or reporting a near miss) in your incident reporting system and sending an email to your manager.



2. **Talk to your Health and Safety representative** (if you have one) about your concerns



3. If the issue remains unresolved, **contact the NSWNMA for more advice and assistance** on 1300 367 962 or [gensec@nswnma.asn.au](mailto:gensec@nswnma.asn.au)

