

Fatigue at work

What is fatigue?

In general, people need 7 – 9 hours sleep per night. If you have difficulty falling and staying asleep, and getting enough sleep, you are at risk of experiencing fatigue.

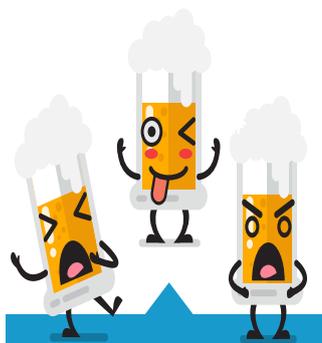
Fatigue is more than feeling drowsy or tired.

It is mental and/or physical exhaustion that impairs work performance and safety.

People who have difficulty sleeping are more likely to use alcohol and drugs. People may take alcohol and/or drugs to:

1. overcome the effects of fatigue (e.g., by using stimulants, like methamphetamine)
2. induce sleepiness (e.g., by using depressants like alcohol or certain pharmaceutical drugs).

When combined with alcohol and drugs, fatigue can worsen and have serious effects on health and performance. Alcohol and drug use are associated with poorer mental health (e.g., depression and anxiety) which can also cause sleep difficulties and fatigue.



Fatigue and alcohol have similar effects on work performance.

- Being awake for 17 hours has the same effect as a 0.05 blood alcohol content (BAC).
- Being awake for 20 hours has the same effect as a 0.1 BAC.¹

Discussion Date

Supervisor/Manager

Workers' Names

What causes fatigue?

Fatigue can result from:

1. alcohol and drug use
2. workplace factors
3. individual and family circumstances
4. a combination of the above.

Fatigue is a stressor that can:

- be caused by alcohol and/or drug use
- be worsened by alcohol and/or drug use
- lead to increased alcohol and drug use.

Ask for help if you feel mentally or physically exhausted.

Ask others if they need help.



Fatigue risk factors

Alcohol & Drugs



1 or 2 drinks can make you snooze
5 or more drinks can make your sleep poor

Alcohol disrupts the type of sleep that makes you feel rested and can make fatigue worse.

While **cannabis** can initially help workers sleep, its sleep-promoting effects reduce as use increases. Cannabis withdrawal can cause severe sleep difficulties, strange dreams and insomnia.

Opioids affect sleep patterns and reduce the quality and amount of sleep.

Over-the-counter (OTC) or prescription medicines e.g., for treating allergies, depression, pain, high blood pressure, nausea and muscle spasms may cause fatigue as a side-effect.

Stimulants (e.g., methamphetamine and cocaine) interfere with brain activity and sleep, leading to insomnia and extreme fatigue. Sleep deprivation and exhaustion are common in the come-down and withdrawal phases.

Individual/Family

- Lack of exercise and poor diet
- Little social or family support
- Obesity
- Smoking
- Sleep apnoea (breathing stops when sleeping)
- Poor mental health/mental illness
- Low blood pressure
- Financial pressure

Workplace

- Prolonged or intense mental or physical activity
- Sleep loss and/or body clock disruption (e.g., shift work)
- Organisational change
- Travel or long commute times
- Exceptionally hot or cold working environments
- Rosters, timing of work and shifts (e.g., early start times)
- Excessively long shifts
- Inadequate recovery time between shifts (e.g., being on call)
- Strenuous jobs

Ask for help if you feel mentally or physically exhausted.

Ask others if they need help.



Discussion topics

1. What are some signs of fatigue?

Signs of fatigue include:

- a need for extra sleep
- blurred/impaired vision
- excessive yawning
- inability to concentrate
- increased irritability
- reduced hand-eye coordination
- short-term memory problems
- slow reflexes and reaction times
- tiredness even after sleep.

2. How many fatigue signs do you have?

3. What can we (our workplace) do to help you reduce fatigue?

4. What should you do if you are fatigued?

Handouts (available on the WorkLife website)

[WorkLife Fatigue Poster](#)

- Sleep Health Foundation. (2011). [10 Tips for a Good Night's Sleep](#)
- Sleep Health Foundation. (2013). [Fatigue as an occupational hazard.](#)

Worker resources and handouts are available at <https://worklife.flinders.edu.au/external-site-resources>.
References are available at <https://worklife.flinders.edu.au/references>.

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