

Fatigue & alcohol and drug use

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/or drug use.

What is fatigue?

Workers who have difficulty falling and staying asleep, and getting enough sleep often experience fatigue.

Fatigue is more than feeling drowsy.

Signs of fatigue include:

- tiredness even after sleep
- reduced hand-eye coordination
- slow reflexes and reaction times
- short-term memory problems
- inability to concentrate
- blurred/impaired vision
- a need for extra sleep during time off work.

In the workplace, fatigue involves mental and/or physical exhaustion that impairs work performance and safety.

The alcohol, drugs and fatigue relationship

Alcohol

Workers who have difficulty sleeping sometimes use alcohol and/or drugs to help.²⁵

While alcohol is a depressant that increases sleepiness, it can also disrupt sleep and reduce sleep quality.

While 1-2 standard drinks may help workers fall asleep faster; 5 or more drinks will increase their chances of waking early at 2 or 3 am when the most restful sleep occurs.

What causes fatigue?

Fatigue can be caused by:

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

Contributory workplace factors

- prolonged or intense mental or physical activity
- sleep loss and/or body clock disruption
- organisational change
- travel
- very hot or cold working environments
- rosters, timing of work and shifts
- excessively long shifts
- inadequate recovery time between shifts
- strenuous jobs
- long commutes.



Using alcohol to help fall asleep is a short-term solution, and it may exacerbate existing problems or produce new ones.

Although small amounts of alcohol may help you fall asleep initially, tolerance can quickly develop and workers may need to drink more alcohol to induce sleepiness.

Alcohol:

1. reduces the dreaming stage of sleep which is important for memory, learning and regulating nervous system activity and mood^{22, 24}
2. increases daytime sleepiness and physical and mental impairment in someone who is already fatigued
3. can cause or worsen sleep apnoea where the muscles in the throat relax and obstruct breathing, causing the person to waken.¹⁷ Sleep apnoea contributes to daytime sleepiness, difficulty concentrating, depression, headaches, decreased libido and impotence, high blood pressure, heart problems, and stroke.

Constant disruption to sleep leads to shorter periods of poor-quality sleep and greater fatigue.¹³

Drugs

Drug use can also affect fatigue. Workers may use over-the-counter (OTC), prescribed, and/or illicit drugs to:

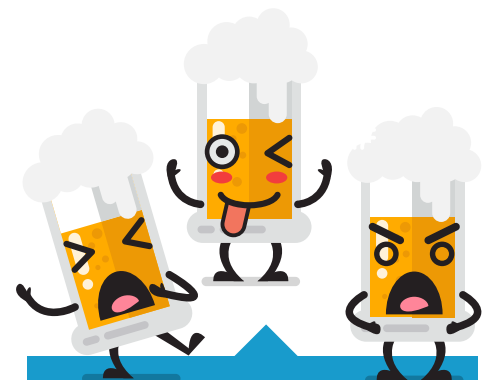
1. overcome the effects of fatigue to meet work, social, and family commitments
2. treat other medical conditions and experience fatigue as a side-effect
3. counteract feelings of fatigue when they are 'coming down' or withdrawing from drug use.

The effects of specific drug types on sleep are described below.



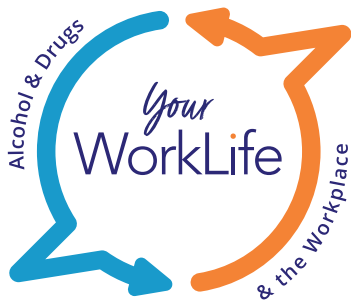
1 or 2 drinks can make you drowsy

5 or more drinks can make your sleep lousy



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.¹²



Methamphetamine

Methamphetamine is sometimes used to increase concentration and alertness, and to mask the effects of fatigue.

Increases workplace risk as it:

- impairs judgement
- heightens risk-taking behaviour
- intensifies fatigue effects.¹

Disrupts brain chemistry and prevents sleep, sometimes for several days, causing insomnia and extreme fatigue.¹

Because of sleep deprivation, exhaustion is common during the come down and withdrawal phases.³

Can also cause depression and anxiety which further interferes with sleep.¹



Opioids

Opioids are often taken to relieve pain.

Can affect sleep patterns and reduce the quality and amount of sleep.¹⁶



Cannabis

Cannabis withdrawal can cause severe sleep difficulties and contribute to fatigue.²¹

Use can initially help workers sleep; however, its sleep promoting effects reduce as use increases.

Can cause strange dreams, insomnia and poor sleep quality.²

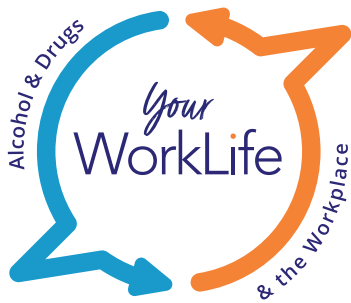


Cocaine

Cocaine use can temporarily decrease the need for food and sleep and impair sleep quality.²

During withdrawal, sleep may appear to be improving but may be worsening. This misperception has been termed 'occult insomnia'.²

Withdrawal can result in sleep disturbances, hypersomnia, bad dreams, depressed mood, psychomotor agitation, fatigue, and increased appetite.²



Helping fatigued workers

Fatigued workers should not:

- drive
- operate hazardous equipment
- complete high risk work activities (e.g., working at heights, installing wiring)
- participate in medical or surgical procedures
- work with flammable, explosive, and/or electrical substances
- use alcohol and/or drugs to combat the effects of fatigue.

Fatigued workers should speak with their manager, supervisor, or team leader about strategies to improve their sleep.



Managers, supervisors, and team leaders should:

- consult workers about the impact of working conditions, including workloads and work schedules
- examine current work practices, systems and processes including:
 - work scheduling
 - shift work and rosters
 - job demands
 - environmental conditions (e.g., noise, dust, heat, cold)
 - conduct a risk/needs assessment to identify workers at risk of fatigue from work, family, social and personal factors (e.g., birth of a baby)
- review workplace incident and absenteeism data
- remind workers about the risks of using alcohol and/or drugs to reduce fatigue or aid sleep
- encourage workers to use apps or other techniques to help them sleep better (e.g., exercise).

Organisations should:

- include confidential reporting processes in your workplace alcohol and drug policy to encourage workers to discuss prescription and OTC drug use with their supervisors and identify alternative work options
- offer workers a choice of a permanent roster or rotating shifts
- limit successive night shifts to less than three or four
- avoid early morning starts before 6am
- avoid long working hours (i.e. 50+ hours per week)
- build regular free weekends into the shift schedule (i.e., at least every three weeks)
- arrange shift start/finish times to account for public transport and travelling time, and workers' social and domestic activities
- provide workers with financial assistance to purchase environmental sleep aids for their homes (e.g., block out curtains).

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>.