

Shift workers most impaired on first night shift following day shifts

November 28 2007

Researchers at Harvard Medical School affiliate Brigham and Women's Hospital (BWH) have found that the attention of shift workers is most impaired on the first night shift following a string of day shifts. This research appears in the November 28, 2007 edition of the Public Library of Science ONE.

“It is important to identify this first night shift as being most vulnerable to impairment in attention, because critical jobs like medical care, airport baggage screening, law enforcement, and air-traffic control are routinely done at night,” said Nayantara Santhi, a fellow in the Division of Sleep Medicine at BWH and lead author of the paper. “Additionally, traditional methods like exposure to bright light and fixed sleep schedule that reduce attentional impairment during night shift work are not as effective during this first night shift.”

Researchers tested selective attention with visual search tasks in participants in a shift work simulation, which included four day shifts followed by three night shifts. They found that attention during the first night shift was the most impaired, with participants unable to stay focused on tasks. They were spending less time attending to search items and making more errors.

This research was funded by a grant from the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute.

Source: Harvard Medical School

Citation: Shift workers most impaired on first night shift following day shifts (2007, November 28) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2007-11-shift-workers-impaired-night-day.html>

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