

Shift work and sleep problems

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Dear Mayo Clinic: I started working a night shift six months ago, and I just can't get enough sleep. I'm having a hard time staying asleep during the day. Most days, I get five hours of sleep or less. What can I do to get more sleep? I'm worried that lack of sleep is going to affect my health.

A: Trying to [sleep](#) during the day rather than at night can be difficult. As you've found out, humans naturally are wired to be awake during the day and sleep at night. But there are steps you can take to help your [body](#) adjust and get the sleep you need.

Your body has an internal sleep-wake rhythm. In most people, that rhythm generally fits a 24-hour cycle. Because of your sleep-wake rhythm, you get sleepy at certain times of the day and become more alert at other times. The main influence on this rhythm is exposure to external light.

Shift work often presents [sleep problems](#) because the timing is a mismatch between your body's biological sleep-wake cycle and the schedule required by your job. When you have to work, your internal rhythm wants you to sleep. When you are done working and you want to sleep, your body thinks it's time to be awake.

To help your body get enough sleep, first, stay consistent. Go to bed and get up at the same time each day, including on your days off. This will allow your body to adapt to your schedule. Changing your sleep schedule when you don't work makes it much more difficult for your body to adjust, making it less likely you will get the sleep you need over time.

When you go to work, surround yourself with plenty of bright light. If you drink caffeine, do it early in your shift. If the sun starts to rise during your commute home, wear dark sunglasses to dim the external light. As soon as you arrive home, go to bed. If you delay, it will be more difficult to get to sleep.

Set up your bedroom environment to help you sleep. Keep it dark, covering the windows with room-darkening shades or curtains to block out any external light. Wearing a sleep mask over your eyes also may be useful. Adjust the temperature in your room so it is cool and

comfortable.

Your surroundings should be quiet. If other family members are home when you sleep, ask them to respect your need to rest. If possible, sleep in a room located away from family areas that can get noisy. Unplug or turn off phones and other electronic devices so you are not disturbed.

Leading a healthy, active lifestyle also can promote [healthy sleep](#). Eat a well-balanced diet. Keep alcohol to a minimum. Although alcohol can make it easier to fall asleep faster, it makes it harder to stay asleep. Exercise regularly.

Most adults need seven to eight hours of sleep every 24 hours. Few people can function well on five hours or less. Without enough sleep, your health may suffer. You probably already know that lack of sleep can lead to fatigue, irritability and difficulty concentrating. But, over time, people who don't get the sleep they need also may be at higher risk for other health problems, including [high blood pressure](#), heart disease and diabetes.

If you try these tips consistently for two weeks and still have problems getting enough sleep, talk to your doctor. He or she may be able to give you additional suggestions for steps you can take to adjust your body's sleep-wake rhythm.

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