

Education essential for eating well on the night shift

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In Australia, one in every five employees are shift workers. But when you work irregular hours, you eat at irregular hours and this can put you at increased risk of weight gain, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease.

Now, a world-first study conducted by the University of South Australia and Monash University is investigating strategies to help shift workers better manage their [eating habits](#) when they work at night.

The SWIFt study—funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)—is focused on finding suitable diet plans that can empower shift workers to better regulate their [health](#).

In Australia, 1.5 million Australians are employed as shift workers, with more than 200,000 regularly working a night or evening shift.

UniSA researcher Dr. Michelle Headland says that the combination of irregular sleep patterns and eating round the clock can seriously affect shift workers' health.

"When you work irregular hours, your eating and sleeping patterns are affected, causing metabolic changes that can affect your health," Dr. Headland says.

"Our body relies upon regular rhythms of energy storage and usage, guided by day and night. When we upset this balance by eating or sleeping at odd hours, our body can't compensate, and we end up with higher levels of glucose which contributes to weight gain.

"Shift work makes traditional weight loss plans extremely hard to follow, so what we've been doing is exploring alternatives."

Co-researcher and UniSA colleague Professor Alison Coates says that the best way to stay healthy as a shift [worker](#) is through education.

"Prevention often comes hand in hand with education. If we can ensure that Australia's shift workers are informed about healthy food options for the night shift, they can learn to make simple and sustainable changes

to their diets," Prof Coates says.

"Being prepared is key. By spending as little as 10 minutes a day on planning and preparing your meals, you're more likely to snack on healthier foods and avoid treats from the vending machine.

"Of course, a healthy variety of foods increases your chance of optimal nutrition, and if you include high-fiber and low-GI foods, you'll not only stay fuller for longer, but also regulate your glucose and cholesterol levels.

"Choosing smaller serves or meals when you're on a night shift can stop you from feeling drowsy, without taking on too many calories, and [drink water](#) to stay hydrated, as opposed to a coffee—it may perk you up, but too much can drag your health down."

The SWIFt study has over 200 enrolled participants and is currently on a final round of recruitment.

More information: Michelle Rogers et al, Meal timing, sleep, and cardiometabolic outcomes, *Current Opinion in Endocrine and Metabolic Research* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.coemr.2021.03.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.coemr.2021.03.006)

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