

What's behind burnout and exhaustion in nursing staff?

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A research survey of almost nine-hundred nursing staff has found that long hours combined with poor staffing and little choice in working patterns is likely to be behind nurses burning out and becoming exhausted at work.

Working 12-hour shifts in hospitals is quite common and in previous research it has been found that nursing staff that regularly work long shifts can burn out, and in some cases leave the profession or become ill.

Dr. Chiara Dall'Ora, Dr. Zoe Ejebu, Professor Jane Ball and Professor Peter Griffiths from the University of Southampton examined responses from 870 [nurses](#) in the UK and looked at the factors affecting their [work life](#).

The research is published in the journal *Occupational Medicine*.

The team found that working shifts between eight and 12 hours, inadequate staffing levels and having no choice over shift length were associated with an increased risk of burnout. Also that, inadequate staffing levels, no choice over shift length and rarely, or never taking breaks were associated with exhaustion.

The researchers concluded that staff who had a complete choice over shift patterns were less likely to experience burnout and exhaustion, but that this needs to be considered carefully in a healthcare setting. Dr. Chiara Dall'Ora explains: "Complete choice over [work hours](#) may have little impact if other factors contributing to burnout and exhaustion persist and complete [choice](#) of work hours might be impractical in settings providing 24/7 care."

"Instead, we need to find innovative solutions that balance nurses' preferences and [health services](#)' staffing needs, while limiting unhealthy working hours. Given the implications of burnout on [nurse](#) well-being, retention and [patient safety](#), finding such solutions is imperative."

Last Autumn the health charity, The King's Fund, released a report suggesting that despite constant pressures and chronic shortages, the number of nurses leaving the NHS had flatlined over recent years, but

that analysis of [new data](#) shows there has been a large increase in nurses leaving the NHS, and that this trend is being driven by younger workers.

According to their report, the last year's data (June 2021—June 2022) saw a 25% increase in the number of NHS nurses leaving their role, with an additional 7,000 leaving compared to the previous year. The largest increase in numbers leaving was seen among the younger nurses—two thirds of leavers were under 45 years of age.

More information: C Dall'Ora et al, Shift work characteristics and burnout among nurses: cross-sectional survey, *Occupational Medicine* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/occmed/kqad046](https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqad046)

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