

Working hours

'read out'

Here is an example of an incident in WA.

A young worker died on his way to work when the car he was driving crashed into a safety barrier on the freeway. There was no evidence of brakes being applied before the car crashed. It was identified that the young man was employed by two security companies. He had finished a 7 hour shift and after a five hour break, he started a 12.5 hour night shift finishing at 6.30am. The incident occurred as he was on his way to another three hour shift with only a three hour break.

'ask'

Q. What factors contributed to the incident?

Possible answers: Lack of sleep, fatigue, loss of concentration and insufficient recovery times between shifts.

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You have identified some of the risk factors in working long hours. Sleep disturbance and fatigue are health risks most commonly associated with long working hours.

In Japan they have a syndrome called Karoshi which means “death from overwork”. It has resulted in workers compensation claims for heart attack and stroke. Most people who have died of Karoshi have worked 3,000 hours per year – more than double the normal 37 hour week.

A study of 8,000 people conducted by the Australian Council of Trade Unions showed that 31% of full time workers in Australia work hours which in Europe would be unlawful. Nearly a 1/4 of Australian workers work 50+ hrs per week. There are higher than average working hours or overtime patterns in WA particularly in mining; agriculture, forestry and fishing; accommodation, cafes and restaurants; transport and storage; and construction.

But it isn't always about the length of time we spend working. There is a complex relationship between working hours and fatigue.

There are different forms of fatigue affecting mind and body.

- Performance fatigue affects speed, reaction time and skills. So work involving repetitive movements, frequent manual handling or physically demanding tasks can lead to fatigue which can cause muscle or soft tissue injuries.
- Mental fatigue affects vigilance, judgement, mood, decision making and communication. So high concentration or mentally demanding work can lead to fatigue, work related stress and increased risks associated with making critical decisions.
- Increased exposure to other hazards like noise, hazardous substances and vibration may also lead to fatigue developing.

It is difficult to generalise and pinpoint specific hours or working arrangements that lead to the possibility of fatigue. Different factors contribute, like job role, industry, work culture and individual factors such as age and state of health.

But researchers and the community agree where there is fatigue it can impact on productivity and is an occupational safety and health issue.

Workplace safety and health is everyone's responsibility

Our employer has a duty of care to provide a safe workplace and systems of work, information instruction and training and an opportunity for workers to consult about safety at work. In relation to working hours this would include:

- **Identifying hazards** associated with our environment at work, working hours and the sort of work we do, then assessing the risks associated with the identified hazards. For example, if workers are working long shifts, they may be more likely to have an incident. You should be told what tasks are expected to be completed at what stage in the shift.
- **Ensuring there are policies on working arrangements** such as two jobs, breaks between shifts, maximum hours worked before a break and maximum overtime hours worked.
- **Ensuring there is instruction on the effects of working long hours.** For example, how to manage sleep when doing shift work, the risks of coming to work tired, lifestyle choices, fatigue indicators and management.
- **Looking at the level of supervision**, especially at the end of shifts.
- **Giving workers the opportunity to discuss working arrangements, and negotiate suitable hours and working arrangements.** Consultation between employers and employees and safety and health representatives and committees is an important part of the risk management process to identify hazards before injury, illness or incident occur and develop measures to eliminate or reduce the associated risks.

As individuals, we have a responsibility to take reasonable care to ensure our own safety and health and that of others affected by our work. We should be aware of our responsibilities and that lifestyle and individual choices (such as second jobs) may contribute to fatigue and impaired performance.

We can help address working hours and fatigue at this workplace by:

- planning social activities so adequate time for sleep is scheduled;
- being aware of the signs of fatigue;
- helping to identify the problem at the workplace;
- cooperating with and being supportive of colleagues trying to control fatigue;
- seeking confidential help with emotional and family problems that may be contributing to fatigue;
- employing simple strategies that can help a fatigued person be refreshed; and
- seeking professional advice if health matters, such as a poor diet, recent illness, injury or sleep disorders, may be contributing to fatigue.

'ask'

Q. Before I finish, is there anything that you can identify that we could be doing better in this workplace to combat fatigue or improve our working hours?

Take notes about any suggestions... don't panic if there aren't any takers.

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OK, unless anyone has any questions, thanks for listening to me

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