TECHNICAL CORNER: TIPS FOR WORKING THE NIGHT SHIFT
By Cynthia Mattice, MS, RPSGT

Question
What are some things that I can do to stay alert during my shift as a night sleep technologist?

Answer
Certainly, in our profession, we recognize the importance of a “good night’s sleep,” regardless of the part of the day when sleep occurs. The responsibility of evaluating patients with sleep disorders requires us to be vigilant and observant during a time when we would rather be sleeping. The challenge to maintain alertness is greatest for sleep technologists who work alone in a two-bed sleep center. Knowledge is power when it comes to taking care of your sleep health. Let’s take a look at some strategies that can help you stay alert during the night shift:

1. **Sleep wisely**
   Establish and keep a regular sleep schedule. Try to stay as close to this schedule even on your days off. Night sleep technologists usually won’t sleep as many hours as a day-shift sleep technologist. Napping can be an important part of your sleep cycle, as even a brief nap of less than 30 minutes before a night shift can boost alertness. If you plan to shift your sleep-wake cycle on your days off, try taking a short nap after your last night shift for the week and then go to bed a little earlier that night. Be sure to nap on the day when you first shift back to nights.

2. **Eat well**
   It is important to eat well-balanced meals on a regular schedule. Bringing your meals and snacks from home will help you stay away from fatty foods and high-sugar snacks during your shift. Many sleep technologists have found that eating a light meal while working the night shift seems to work best. Plan to have your largest meal after you wake up. Here are a few healthy, high-energy foods to try during your shift: fruits, vegetables, bagels, pretzels, crackers and popcorn.

3. **Exercise regularly**
   Develop an exercise program that fits your lifestyle. When you are able to take a break during your shift, some light exercise or a brisk walk can help to increase alertness.

4. **Use caffeine in moderation**
   Caffeine can improve alertness and work performance. Maximize this benefit by combining caffeine with a brief nap. Caffeine also can disrupt sleep, however, so try to consume caffeinated beverages early in your shift. Moderation is the key. Caffeine takes approximately 15 to 20 minutes to enter your system and lasts approximately 3.5 hours.

5. **Monitor light levels**
   Bright light exposure during the night shift can improve alertness. Monitor the light level in your technical control room to achieve optimal alertness when you need it. Some sleep facilities have light boxes for staff to use during the night shift.

6. **Be aware of fatigue**
   During your shift, be attentive to the cues of fatigue. These include:
   - Eyes briefly going out of focus or closing
   - Headache
   - Stomach ache
   - Drowsiness
   - Impaired concentration
   - Inability to focus on details
   - Distraction
   - Increased irritability

Fatigue can impact your relationships at work and at home.

7. **Drive home safely**
   After working the night shift, the drive home can be a challenge. One of the benefits of strategic napping is that it can reduce your risk of being involved in an accident on the drive home. Some sleep centers have a designated place where sleep technologists can safely get some sleep before driving home. If you have a long distance to drive, pulling into a safe area and taking a short nap is a much better alternative than falling asleep at the wheel. Another good option is to arrange for a family member or friend to pick you up from work so you don’t have to drive at all.

References


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