

*Editor's Note: Safety Group Program Monthly Newsletter Article – February 2019
Contact: Mindy Carrothers (303.361.4790, mindy.carrothers@pinnacol.com)*

Worker Fatigue — Causes and Controls

You didn't sleep well last night. As you drive in to work, you realize you forgot to return the coffee creamer to the fridge ... and you left your cell phone on the counter. Not the end of the world — but fatigue-related mistakes at work can have catastrophic consequences. The Exxon Valdez, Chernobyl and Three Mile Island tragedies had one thing in common: Employee fatigue played a role.

Business impact and health risks

A [2016 report from RAND Europe](#) concluded that lack of sleep results in a 13 percent increased risk of death and the loss of 1.2 million workdays per year in the United States. And fatigue increases absenteeism and “presenteeism,” and reduces annual productivity to the tune of \$2,000 per employee. The health risks of poor sleep are well-documented. People who sleep fewer than seven hours a night have higher rates of obesity, hypertension, diabetes, depression, cancer, infection and stroke. When we sleep too little, we don't produce certain hormones that are critical to keeping us healthy.

Causes of fatigue at work

Long work hours, prolonged periods of physical or mental activity, insufficient break times, inadequate rest, excessive stress, or a combination of these factors can cause fatigue-related accidents.

Workplace triggers of fatigue

These workplace conditions can trigger worker fatigue:

- Dim lighting.
- Limited vision due to the weather or work-site conditions.
- High temperatures.
- Loud noises.
- Tasks that must be done for a long time.

- Tasks that are repetitive, difficult, boring or monotonous.

What employers can do

Yes, workers are responsible for good sleep habits. But your organization can take steps to change lighting, temperature and noise at work sites. Additionally, consider these changes for employees engaged in shift work:

- Minimize permanent, unchanging night shifts.
- Reduce consecutive night shifts to four or fewer.
- Schedule shorter night shifts.
- Plan rotations to include some weekends off.
- Rotate forward (i.e., a clockwise rotation of mornings, afternoons and nights).

Develop a fatigue-management program

Task an employee or team with creating a fatigue-management program that includes the following elements:

- Balancing workload and staffing.
- Shift scheduling guidelines.
- Workplace design (e.g., lighting, temperature and noise levels).
- Fatigue monitoring.
- Incident reporting, recording, investigation and auditing.
- Employee training on fatigue hazards and health risks, sleep disorders, good sleep habits, recommended diet and exercise, and fatigue-management strategies.

Resources

[OSHA](#), the [National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health](#) and the [American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine](#) provide helpful information, research and resources concerning occupational fatigue. In 2017, several industrial and governmental organizations cosponsored a [conference on worker fatigue](#), focusing on causes and controls. The conference website includes insightful abstracts, presentations and updates.

Additionally, we invite you and your team to contact Pinnacol's Safety On Call at safetyoncall@pinnacol.com or 303.361.4700 or 888.501.4752. Our safety consultants stand ready to help your organization manage employee fatigue.