

Fatigue and fitness for duty

By Amy Stewart



Be sure to review your company's injury logs and past injury reports for incidents involving fatigue. If fatigue has caused accidents, obtain a copy of the incident report to review with employees. Review the incident, maintaining the individual employee's privacy.

Ask the group how many of them are tired today. Then ask if they were allowed a nap today, how and where they would arrange it. Also, ask how many of them got eight hours of sleep last night before coming to work.

Tell the group that fatigue is a contributing factor in losses, though tracking and measurement is not a common practice. Ask how many are in agreement that fitness for duty has something to do with fatigue, and what other factors determine whether or not you are fit for duty.

Share with the group that the transportation industry has increased awareness of fatigue and fitness for duty in the last five years. Railroads have had hours of service limitations since 1907, and other modes of transit limit the hours of work. We challenge you to look at a more global picture of reducing risk with alternative strategies.

Small group discussion

If the group is not large enough for small group break-outs, discuss the following three concepts as a large group. If the group is too large, give two groups the same set of questions.

Ask group one how much sleep do they get at one time, and if they nap, how long they nap. Inquire about how often they get sleepy at work, and how often might they fall asleep while driving per week, month or year.

Ask how their lack of sleep affects their work quality. See if the group knows the recommendation of the sleep experts for the amount of sleep nightly for adults?

Summarize answers to each question, and choose a spokesperson for the group.

Ask group two to define fatigue, and what causes fatigue. List types of fatigue and symptoms; and list the ways to overcome each type, labeling them healthy or unhealthy. Define fitness for duty, and imagine situations where a person may be unfit to work, affecting the safety of that employee or others.

Summarize your discussion and answers to share with the large group.

Ask group three if they can imagine or recall the consequences of fatigue, and what they suggest for solutions to a nationwide problem of sleep deprivation.

Give examples in your workplace for the provision or acknowledgement of power naps; and nutrition, health or wellness to reduce the fatigue factor. If you would like, role play a situation where fitness for duty is a factor.

Large group discussion

With a spokesperson from each group, summarize what was discussed and how the rest might learn from the discussions. Clarify answers, based on current fatigue studies.

Survey the answers of group one. Then, share the results of an Australian study that showed:

- After 17 hours of sustained wakefulness, hand-eye coordination decreased to a level equivalent to performance of a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of .05 percent;
- After 24 hours, abilities decreased to an equivalent of .10 percent BAC, which exceeds the legal limit for driving while intoxicated.

In addition, sleep experts recommend eight hours of nightly sleep for adults, though the National Sleep Foundation annual polls find that the average adult sleeps less than seven hours a night during the work week. In terms of sleepiness in the workplace, 40 percent of the American work force report that sleepiness on the job reduces the quality of their work, and one in five reports making occasional errors due to sleepiness.

Share group two's answers. Then, let the group know that fatigue is a loss of alertness, but not always caused by lack of sleep. Undiagnosed obstructive sleep apnea, other health problems, prescription pain-relieving medications, recent cocaine use, long working hours, split shifts/work schedule, environment, lack of exercise, poor nutrition and drug issues all affect human alertness.

Share with the group that a fitness for duty (FFD) medical evaluation can be performed to determine if an employee is mentally or physically capable of performing essential functions of a job without risk of injury to the worker or co-workers. Specific situations that usually warrant consideration for an FFD exam in a more global sense are:

- Potential for workplace violence;
- Impaired concentration;
- Paranoid thinking;
- Abusive behavior to co-workers or customers;
- Anticipated return from an extended medical leave.

Presently, there is no objective test to measure a person's level of alertness. For now, we must rely on our own judgment, which could be skewed by the fatigue factor.

There may be duties you can list for which an employee needs to be fit: agility, lifting, inspecting, bending/stooping, perceptual skills, judgment or coordination.

Discuss group three's answers. Then, share these consequences: Lost productivity, absenteeism, turnover, morale and increased wear and tear on equipment are affected by employee fatigue. Ask the group what is in their workplace to promote health and wellness. Inquire how they combat fatigue and how they might make adjustments in their lifestyle to manage fatigue.

References

Articles

- Williamson, A.M. and A.M. Feyer, "Moderate sleep deprivation produces impairments in cognitive and motor performance equivalent to legally prescribed levels of alcohol intoxication," *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 2000, Oct., 57 (1): 649-55.

Web sites

- Study at The Scripps Research Institute Indicates that Long-Haul Truckers Obtain Less Sleep than is Necessary for Alertness on the Job: www.scripps.edu/news/press/091197.html
- Sleep Disorders (National Library of Medicine): www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/sleepdisorders.html
- National Sleep Foundation: www.sleepfoundation.org
- National Center on Sleep Disorders Research: www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/ncsdr
- Plain Language about Shiftwork (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health): www.cdc.gov/niosh/pdfs/97-145.pdf
- President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition: www.fitness.gov

Videos

BWC's Division of Safety & Hygiene's video library has a number of videos on fatigue, shift work and wellness. These are available for loan to Ohio employers. Order a catalog by calling 1-800-OHIOWC (ask for the video library), or visit our Web site, ohiobwc.com.

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