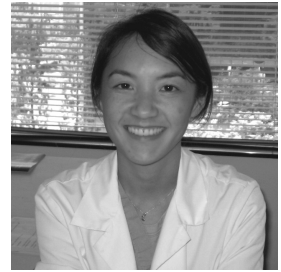


Approach to Working the Night Shift

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Constantly switching between day and night shifts is a reality in every emergency medicine resident's life. Most residents that I spoke to have their own strategy – drinking coffee, strategically sleeping before the start of a stretch of night shifts, eating dinner at the end of a night shift. After residency, we will probably never have this many night shifts or be as sleep deprived, but night shifts will still be a part of our lives. As new interns start working across the country and most may be relatively new to switching between day and night schedules, I thought it would be a good time to read up on tips for preparing for and dealing with shift work and share what I learned:

- 1) Keep things dark, cool, quiet: The most important thing when switching to night shifts is readjusting your body's circadian rhythm.¹ It helps to keep your bedroom dark and quiet when you sleep during the day by using black-out curtains, sleep masks, ear plugs, or white-noise machines. Limiting the number of disruptions to your sleep also helps. This includes turning off your cell phone ringer or your pager. Wearing sunglasses on the way home from a night shift may also help you prepare for daytime sleep.
- 2) Napping: Performance and alertness is improved by taking a nap before the start of a series of night shifts. It doesn't seem to matter when the nap occurs, although timing the nap for the afternoon may be easier because there is an increase in sleepiness between noon and 5 pm.²
- 3) Bright lights: Having bright lights on during the night shift may decrease sleepiness, especially at the peak of sleepiness (2 am and 7 am).²
- 4) Transitioning back to day shifts: Turning on bright lights in the early morning (between 5 and 7 am) can help you transition to day shifts and reset your circadian rhythm. Working night shifts will often increase your sleep debt, so plan on trying to sleep more during the nights after a series of night shifts.
- 5) Exercise and eat well: It's definitely hard to eat healthy foods and exercise during residency, but both may help you tolerate the transition back and forth from day and night shifts. Some recommend eating high protein foods at the beginning of the shift and eating high carbohydrate foods before you plan to sleep.
- 6) Caffeine strategy: Caffeine may be helpful if timed right. In one study, workers who received 4 mg/kg of caffeine between 12:20 and 1:20 am had decreased sleepiness during the shift and had no disturbance in their sleep after the shift.¹ Likewise, caffeine should be avoided in the four hours before planned sleep.
- 7) Other supplements: Studies looking at the usefulness of melatonin to promote sleep produced varying results. Melatonin is likely a relatively safe supplement, but it is not regulated by the FDA so should be used with caution. Most articles about shift work warn against regularly using sedative medications like benzodiazepines as it may lead to addiction.¹

REFERENCES

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2. Mitler MM, Carskadon MA, Czeisler CA, et al. Catastrophes, sleep, and public policy: consensus report. *Sleep.* 1988; 11:100-109.