

In the early 60's less than 1/3 of women worked outside the home. Some experts predicted that in the near future close to 80% of women will be working outside the home. The number of women who are currently shift workers is rising dramatically.

In certain countries in the past women were not allowed to work shifts out of the concern for their childbearing and childbearing and child rearing duties.

According to an October 1995 report on shift work research findings, 21 % of full- time female employees work shifts & are affected more than men by shift work.

The report also indicates that female nightshift workers under 50 years of age sleep " significantly less" than men of the same age working this schedule. The rate of injury among female shift workers is almost triple the rate for male shift workers.

Many shift work related health problems including psychoneurotic, digestive, circulatory and chronic fatigue ailments - are more pronounced for women. Premenstrual effects, menopausal effects, pregnancy symptoms such as headaches, nausea, and sleep disruption are aggravated by shift work, and have been implicated in causing lower birth weights and pregnancy loss.

Some studies suggest women working rotating shifts experience longer menstrual periods and suffer more tension and illness at menstruation than those who work straight day or night shifts. In some women premenstrual depression is intensified by shift work.

For shift workers who are mothers, parental responsibilities often clash with circadian rhythms. This results in mothers

feeding children and getting them off to school when internal biological clocks are set for periods of sleep. Child care involves many other demands that include:

- Shopping for food and other supplies
- Preparing meals & cleaning up
- Interacting with teachers & sitters
- Chauffeuring children to appointments

Given social expectations and maternal instincts, mothers often feel compelled to take better care of their children than themselves. In addition to child care, they also may be expected to attend to needs of aging parents.

Domestic work especially affects female shift workers. While the image of women as housewives is less common than in previous decades, there is little change in the domestic responsibilities of women.

Women still tend to be responsible for most of the traditional housework. One large study suggests that shift working women actually spend more time doing housework than day workers - probably at the expense of their social and personal life.



Working women generally face a difficult balancing act. When shift work is added to the mix it only adds to the problem. According to one researcher, considering work at

home and the workplace, women work an additional 15 hours longer each week than men - that is several extra months per year.

In addition to their partner, women often rely on a few close friends to help them cope. A trend in some societies is that families move more and there is less support from relatives and friends. Working shift work leaves even less time for family and friends.

Getting sufficient sleep and rest is the most serious problem for female shift workers. The bottom line is to make sure your family and friends are educated about the adverse affects of shift work.

Some tips for coping

- Talk to your family about what shift work is like and explain to them how important sleep is. Let them know that they may have to rearrange their schedules or limit certain activities while you sleep.
- Talk to your family about the hardships of shift work and ask for help in developing strategies to deal with it.
- Make it your priority to get plenty of undisturbed sleep.
- Plan family activities and time together on days off.
- Bright artificial light at home and at work during waking hours may counteract the symptom of premenstrual depression.
- Pay attention to how your work schedule affects your menstrual cycle.
- Be aware of stress in your life.
- Pay particular attention to tips for enhancing sleep.

- Don't take medication without discussing all the alternatives with your doctor.
- In some jurisdictions, pregnant shift workers are excluded from evening and night shifts. It is best to limit frequent changes in shift patterns. Consult your doctor about healthy work options.
- Pregnant shift workers should limit evening and night shifts, and especially frequent changes in shift patterns.
- Consult with your partner, talk about time conflicts and develop a plan for shared responsibility.
- When working evening shifts, if possible have your spouse or babysitter prepare breakfast for the family so you can sleep in. If you must get up with your family for breakfast try to go back to sleep for a few more hours after they leave. If that's not possible take an afternoon nap.
- Be firm with people who try to take an advantage of the fact that you are home during the day. Set your priorities and stick to them!
- Stay in contact with your family through notes, phone calls and occasional breakfasts together.
- If your partner works shift as well, consider installing a home alarm system or doing phone check ins for peace of mind and a deeper sleep.
- Look at ways to balance or reduce housekeeping, such as hiring a cleaning service or having family members do more. Lower your standards.
- Take time for yourself! Remove the guilt associated with taking care of yourself.
- Don't let work rule your life. Take advantage of your time off and holidays to spend time with your family, see friends, enjoy hobbies and pursue different kinds of challenges.

- It's all about attitude! Your attitude regarding shift work can determine how you adjust to a demanding schedule. No matter what the reason for working shifts you can control your attitude towards a shift work lifestyle. If you decide you are going to make the best of shift work, it will make your life easier.

**For more information contact a member of the SFL Shift Work Committee.
Visit our website at www.sfl.sk.ca under SFL Committees / Shiftwork.**



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Shift Work and Women

