



5-minute safety talk

Watch Over Employees Who Work Overtime

From medical facilities to manufacturing, most employees work overtime periodically. But what safety and health hazards should you consider before doubling workers' shifts or asking them to put in more than 50 hours a week?

Overtime rules are rare. The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organization does not issue recommendations for the health care industry, and few federal and state rules limit overtime work in other industries.

Therefore, overtime looks different for different industries. For example, in New York emergency rooms, residents cannot work more than an average of 80 hours a week over four consecutive weeks. Commercial airline pilots cannot work more than 100 hours in a month, and most average 75. Truck drivers must rest 10 hours for every 11 hours of driving and work combined.

Risk list runs long

When employees work too many hours, they can suffer from chronic fatigue, disruption of home and social activities, low morale and muscular strain.

While research shows employees may not have more incidents if they work overtime, they will become more tired — and less alert. Some companies have found that it's good to have open communication and encourage workers to report fatigue.

Fatigue also increases as rest time decreases. Merely providing workers with an eight-hour rest period between shifts most likely is not enough. Workers may jeopardize needed rest by trying to maintain home and social activities.

Risks do not end with the work shift. Fatigue can make all daily activities more dangerous as response times slow and people feel pushed to their limits. Injury rates both off and on the job may rise with overtime.

Further, as the cycle of overtime, fatigue and a disrupted home life continues, morale may drop. This can lead to a lowered immune system making it more likely for health problems such as colds to occur.

Also, consider overexertion and overexposure to hazards. There are certain jobs that do not lend themselves well to overtime conditions. Some examples include jobs that are highly repetitious, involve heavy physical labor, exposure to hazardous material or temperature extremes and prolonged standing.

Plan ahead

Poor planning may be to blame in many overtime situations. Meet changing production demands with research and planning instead of turning directly to overtime. For instance, would alternate schedules or part-time workers meet your needs more safely? Remember, if you implement a bad schedule that requires constant attention, your regular duties — and safety — may suffer.

Other tips for overtime work:

- **Watch your workers.** If possible, overtime should be distributed among everyone. Otherwise, some workers will be placed under extreme, constant stress. Be on the lookout for changes in worker moods.
- **Get involved.** Be more proactive. If the room seems stuffy, open the windows. Encourage teamwork. Ask your safety department for pointers and take time to share them with workers. Talk to workers about lifestyle choices such as nutritious meal planning and proper rest. Lead workers in a short exercise break to loosen muscles and improve alertness.
- **Look on the bright side.** Overtime situations can be great opportunities for cross-training. Less time at one task also alleviates mental and muscular fatigue.
- **Set a good example.** Supervisors should show concern for their workers' well-being. This may mean taking a well-deserved break with your staff before heading into overtime hours. A small break can mean a world of difference.

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