

Everything Wellbeing

How to Survive the Night Shift

Reading time: 3 - 4 minutes

Dear Residents,

Welcome to another post from *Everything Wellbeing*!

Today, we're talking about a highly requested topic—**How to survive the night shift.**

As an EM doctor, the night shift is my constant companion. The added responsibility of running an extremely busy ED with the uncertainty of what's coming through the doors is exhilarating, and it's one of the reasons I fell in love with Emergency Medicine in the first place.

But let's not sugarcoat it: **nights can take a toll.**

Nights are meant for rest and recovery. When you work through them, you put your body under immense stress, essentially confusing your circadian rhythm. And yet, while the world sleeps, we rise to care for our patients and that, my friends, makes us kind of like superheroes.

Although by the middle of my third night shift, I rarely feel like a superhero. I usually feel like collapsing on a sofa and sinking into a deep sleep. Sadly, my job doesn't allow for that! So, what can we do to improve the night shift experience?

Below is a list of a few tips that have helped me over the past 7 years of working nights, combined with a few expert-backed strategies I've come across.

1. Pre-Night Sleep

Try to get some sleep before your first night shift to reduce your overall sleep debt.

Easier said than done, I know I often get stuck in the whirlwind of daily tasks.

But if you don't manage to sleep before your shift, you'll end up being awake for over 24 hours by the end of it. That's not good for you, and certainly not good for your patients.

So, try to keep your phone away, block out the light, and prioritise sleep, even a short rest in the afternoon before your shift begins can help you function better.

2. Food

Don't start your night shift hungry or dehydrated. Prep your meals in advance, eat before heading in, and make sure you're hydrated. You're already sleep-deprived, don't add hunger into the mix.

It's tough enough to eat healthy during the day, and even harder at night when your brain starts craving sugar and carbs. I really struggle with this. Try to bring along healthy alternatives

That said, a cheeky takeaway pizza with the team now and then? Go for it. It can be a real morale booster.

So, a few snacks are definitely not a bad thing and can be a mood booster, just have some carrot sticks on the side :P

3. Pre-Night Positivity

Let's be honest, no one really enjoys the prospect of a night shift. Try to create a positive mini-ritual to ease into the shift:

- Listen to your favourite upbeat music on your commute.
- Call a friend, family member, or someone who lifts your spirits on your way to work.
- Try a short meditation or grounding breath in the car before walking into the chaos of the NIGHT SHIFT.

Remind yourself that while most of the world is sleeping, *you're awake and making a difference*. That's something to be proud of.

4. Working the Night Shift

Night shifts are **not** the same as day shifts. You're working against your body's internal clock and making high-stakes decisions instead of sleeping.

There is plenty of evidence showing that sleep deprivation and fatigue **increase clinical errors**. That's why it's vital to have insight into how fatigue affects your thinking.

Here are a few strategies I use:

- **Be mindful** of your decisions, especially when prescribing or reviewing investigations.
- If your mind feels foggy, **pause**, take a step back, grab a drink, and then revisit the task.

- If you feel stuck, **ask a colleague**. Sometimes when I'm really tired, I ask my registrar or a junior for reassurance that my plan makes sense.
- Double-check before discharging patients at the end of your night shifts
- **If it's not urgent**, leave the decision for the day team.

Recognising when you're running on empty and knowing how to navigate it can make your nights safer and more sustainable.

5. Breaks

I've written about breaks before, but on nights, they are *twice as important*. Most night shifts last around 10 hours, so make sure you take your **2x30-minute breaks**.

Breaks aren't just about food; they reset your focus and reduce error rates.

- If it's a quieter moment, consider a group huddle or a quick sit-down to check in with each other.
- If you can nap safely, even a 15-minute power nap can work wonders.

No guilt. No apology. A well-rested doctor is a better, safer doctor.

6. Driving After Nights

Finishing a night shift may feel like crossing a finish line, but the most dangerous part of your shift might still be ahead: the drive home.

Why It's Risky

- Studies have shown that 24 hours without sleep can impair your cognitive function as much as being drunk.
- Microsleeps (brief moments of involuntary sleep) can occur without warning, even with your eyes open.
- Reaction times are significantly slower, and you might not realise just how impaired you are.

What You Can Do

- Don't drive drowsy. If you're even slightly unsafe, pause and reassess. Your safety is worth the delay.
- Take a nap at work before heading home. Even 20–30 minutes can significantly reduce risk. I used to sleep for a couple of hours in the on-call room before driving when I used to have a 1-hour commute.

- Use public transport or carpool, if possible. Riding with a colleague is safer than driving solo.
- Explore your hospital's rest facilities. Many trusts have rooms, "sleep pods," or even nearby accommodation you can use post-shift.

Look Out for Each Other

Don't just think about your own drive ask your colleagues how they're planning to get home. If someone appears unfit to drive, speak up. We all need that reminder sometimes.

Yes, sleeping at the hospital or arranging alternative transport can be a hassle. But life comes before convenience. We've lost too many doctors to post-night shift accidents.

Your life is not worth gambling for the sake of getting home quicker.

7. Post-Night Breakfast

A post-shift breakfast with your team can be surprisingly uplifting.

- It's a way to decompress, share a laugh, and wrap up the shift positively.
- These rituals help build camaraderie and give you something to look forward to.
- If you're too tired to go out, maybe try the hospital canteen for a drink and a quick bite

8. Recovery

This is the bit I find most challenging. I often struggle to recover after nights. I'll get a few hours of sleep during the day, but then can't fall asleep at night, which leads to starting my next shift with barely any rest.

Experts recommend:

- Sleeping for a few hours after your last night shift and then waking up and resuming normal daily activities
- Going to bed at your **usual bedtime** to reset your circadian rhythm
- Evidence suggests it takes **two full nights** of sleep to recover properly.
- Try to do something fun on the day after the night shift – It gives you that one thing to look forward to during your nights and also keeps you awake !

💛 Final Thoughts: Be Proud

Night shifts are hard-mentally, physically, and emotionally. But always remember *when the world sleeps, you are awake, making a difference.*

Take pride in that. Your sleepless nights **do** have an impact. You're doing incredibly important work.

So, until next time

Keep doing the amazing work you're doing.

And remember to

Take great care of yourself so you can take great care of others.

Warm regards,

Junaid

Your Friendly Neighbourhood Wellbeing Fellow

💬 *As always, your feedback is welcome so I can keep improving this blog for you.*

<https://forms.office.com/r/tzXAKhkB2S>

📚 Resources

Here are some helpful resources to dive deeper into managing night shifts, rest, and fatigue:

- **Sleep, fatigue, and night shifts – Dr Mike Farquhar (Sleep Consultant):**
<https://www.stgeorges.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Helping-you-work-at-night-Dr-Mike-Farquhar.pdf>
- **British Medical Association (BMA) Fatigue and Sleep Resources:**
<https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/your-wellbeing/fatigue-and-sleep>
- **Sleep and the night shift by Dr Francesca Crawley**
:<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evqj7oKz-xE&t=156s>