



# FATIGUE

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## WHAT IS FATIGUE?

*Fatigue* refers to the state of physical, mental, or emotional exhaustion resulting from prolonged or intense work, inadequate rest, or insufficient recovery time. It occurs when the demands placed on a worker exceed their capacity to maintain alertness and energy, leading to reduced performance, impaired decision-making, and an increased risk of errors or accidents.

Fatigue can be both a hazard in its own right and an outcome of existing workplace hazards. For example, fatigue may result from high job demands, however, the fatigue itself then becomes a separate hazard, as a fatigued worker's reduced alertness, energy and cognitive functioning increase the likelihood of further incidents, errors or harm. Fatigue can arise from various factors, including inadequate rest, insufficient staffing resulting in excessive workloads, monotonous or repetitive tasks and environmental conditions such as extreme temperatures, noise or poor lighting.

Workplaces where fatigue is not adequately managed may experience reduced productivity, higher rates of incidents or injuries, and negative impacts on employee wellbeing, safety, and morale.

## EXAMPLES OF FATIGUE

Fatigue can present in various ways and result from a range of work-related factors. Prolonged or unaddressed fatigue can significantly increase the risk of workplace incidents and injuries.

Some examples of how fatigue may occur or manifest in the workplace include:

- Extended work hours or excessive overtime leading to inadequate rest and recovery
- Shift work or irregular schedules that disrupt normal sleep patterns
- High job demands such as intense workloads, tight deadlines or mentally demanding tasks
- Repetitive or monotonous tasks that cause mental fatigue or disengagement
- Insufficient breaks or opportunities for rest during long work shifts
- Environmental conditions such as extreme heat, cold, noise or poor lighting which exacerbate physical or mental fatigue
- Inadequate staffing levels leading to workers covering additional responsibilities or extended shifts
- Work requiring sustained concentration such as operating machinery, driving or monitoring complex systems without adequate physical and cognitive rest
- Physically demanding tasks that cause muscle fatigue or exhaustion
- Poor work-life balance



- Inadequate training or unclear expectations requiring workers to exert additional mental effort to complete tasks
- Extensive physical activity

### Indicators of fatigue may include:

- Workers displaying slower reaction times, reduced concentration or errors in tasks Increased irritability, poor communication or decreased morale within teams
- Workers reporting persistent tiredness, headaches or difficulty staying awake during work
- Frequent sick leave, absenteeism or complaints of feeling overwhelmed
- Visible signs such as yawning, drowsiness or reduced physical activity

## IMPACTS OF FATIGUE

### ON WORKERS

**Reduced mental alertness:** Fatigue impairs concentration, decision-making and problem-solving abilities, increasing the risk of errors or accidents.

**Slower reaction times:** Workers may respond more slowly to hazards, increasing the likelihood of incidents or injuries.

**Increased stress and irritability:** Prolonged fatigue can lead to emotional distress, mood swings and strained workplace relationships.

**Negative impact on mental health:** Persistent fatigue can contribute to anxiety, depression and burnout.

**Physical health effects:** Fatigue can cause headaches, muscle tension, dizziness and gastrointestinal issues. It may also weaken the immune system, leading to increased illness.

**Sleep disruption:** Fatigued workers may experience difficulty falling or staying asleep, creating a cycle of ongoing tiredness.

### ON ORGANISATIONS

**Decreased productivity:** Conflict and strained relationships among employees can disrupt workflow, create distractions, and hinder collaboration, leading to a decrease in overall productivity.

**Decreased productivity:** Fatigued workers are less efficient, make more errors and require longer to complete tasks, leading to reduced overall output.

**Increased safety incidents and injuries:** Fatigue impairs concentration and reaction times, increasing the likelihood of accidents, near misses and workplace injuries.

**Higher absenteeism and turnover:** Workers experiencing fatigue may take more sick leave or resign due to ongoing exhaustion, placing strain on staffing levels.

**Increased costs:** Fatigue-related incidents, absenteeism and turnover lead to higher costs associated with workers' compensation, recruitment, training and lost productivity.

**Decline in employee morale:** A workplace culture that fails to address fatigue can lead to frustration, disengagement and reduced job satisfaction.



**Reduced productivity:** Workers may struggle to maintain focus, complete tasks efficiently or meet deadlines.

**Poor work-life balance:** Fatigue can impact personal relationships, hobbies and responsibilities outside of work, affecting overall wellbeing.

**Negative impact on teamwork:** Fatigue can create tension and poor communication within teams, hindering collaboration and workplace relationships.

**Damage to organisational reputation:** A workplace with persistent fatigue-related incidents or poor safety practices may suffer reputational harm, affecting relationships with clients, customers and stakeholders.

### RISK ASSESSMENT - RISK MANAGEMENT - CONTROL MEASURES

**Risk Assessment** involves identifying potential hazards, assessing their level of risk (such as likelihood and impact of injuries), and developing **Risk Management** plans to mitigate or control them. It is a **proactive process** that aims to **prevent harm**.

**Control Measures** are specific actions or procedures put in place to manage or mitigate identified risks. They are implemented after hazards have been identified and risks assessed as part of the risk management process. Control measures are designed to reduce the likelihood of harm or the severity of its impact by eliminating risks wherever possible. In cases where risks cannot be entirely eliminated (e.g. the risk of fire for firefighters), the focus is on reducing the risks to the lowest practicable level to minimise the likelihood and severity of harm.



The **Hierarchy of Control** should be referred to as best practice for the most effective ways to control risks.

Substantial research evidence also shows that Risk Assessments, Risk Management plans and Control Measures are **significantly more effective** when developed **in consultation** with workers. Refer to Section 47 (Duty to Consult Workers) and Section 48 (Nature of Consultation) of the **WHS Act**, or Section 35 of the **OHS Act** in Victoria, for specific legal obligations regarding worker consultation.

No one should experience harm or injury in the workplace, including physical and psychological. **Employers have a duty** to ensure health and safety by identifying and eliminating psychosocial risks, or minimising



them as far as is reasonably practicable (for a definition of “reasonably practicable”, see *Section 18 on Page 25 of the [WHS Act](#)* (or *Part 3, Division 1, Clause (2) on Page 23 of the [OHS Act](#)* if you are located in Victoria).

The **duration, frequency and severity** of workers' exposure to psychosocial hazards influences the level of risk. Hazards that interact or combine (e.g. job demands and fatigue) can further amplify the overall risk.

*Additional information on the risk management process is available in the Code of Practice: [How to manage work health and safety risks](#) as well as [Section 2 of the Model Code of Practice for managing Psychosocial Risks](#).*

### Examples of Risk Management Strategies and Control Measures for Fatigue

*The following are examples of ways this hazard can be prevented or controlled, however **please remember to use the Hierarchy of Control** as best practice when implementing such examples at your workplace.*

*Hierarchy of Control Guides for each recognised psychosocial hazard are [available here](#).*

- **Implement shift time limits:** Long shifts increase the likelihood of fatigue, reducing alertness and performance.
- **Provide adequate rest breaks during and between shifts:** Regular breaks help workers recover, reducing physical and mental exhaustion.
- **Ensure adequate staffing levels are maintained:** Inadequate staffing leads to fatigue and burnout from excessive demands.
- **Ensure adequate resources and time is available to complete tasks.**
- **Schedule safety-critical tasks for daytime hours:** Alertness and cognitive function are highest during the day, reducing the risk of errors during critical tasks.
- **Avoid consecutive night shifts where possible:** Night shifts disrupt natural sleep patterns, leading to cumulative fatigue and decreased performance.
- **Conduct fatigue risk assessments and monitor cumulative work hours:** Identifies high-risk tasks, roles, and excessive workloads that contribute to fatigue.
- **Provide fatigue management training for workers and supervisors:** Educates people to recognise fatigue symptoms and take preventive actions, recognising that workers cannot effectively implement fatigue management without support and resourcing from leadership.
- **Optimise work environments with proper lighting, ventilation, and rest facilities:** A comfortable and well-lit environment reduces strain, enhances focus, and supports recovery.
- **Develop a fatigue reporting system for workers:** Encourages workers to report fatigue issues, ensuring timely interventions and safer conditions.
- **Implement a formal Fatigue Management Policy:** Establishes clear guidelines to prevent excessive workloads and cumulative fatigue. Defined work hour limits here.
- **Encourage job rotation and flexible work arrangements:** Reduces prolonged exposure to demanding tasks, providing variety and lowering mental and physical fatigue.

#### DO

Schedule safety-critical tasks for daytime hours

#### DO NOT



### Limit shift lengths

Provide regular rest breaks during shifts and sufficient recovery time between shifts

Avoid consecutive night shifts where possible

Educate workers and supervisors on fatigue management, including recognising signs of fatigue and its risks.

Encourage workers to report fatigue using a no-blame reporting system to ensure issues are addressed promptly.

Implement a formal Fatigue Management Policy with clear guidelines on work hours, rest, and reporting.

Monitor and manage cumulative work hours (including overtime) to prevent excessive workloads.

Optimise the work environment with proper lighting, ventilation, temperature control and quiet rest facilities.

Schedule long shifts without appropriate breaks or recovery time

Ignore signs of fatigue such as reduced focus, slower reaction times or increased errors.

Rely solely on caffeine or stimulants to manage fatigue—they are short-term fixes and mask the problem.

Assign back-to-back night shifts without adequate recovery time

Allow excessive overtime without monitoring for cumulative fatigue.

Never place blame on workers for reporting fatigue—this discourages transparency and creates unsafe conditions.

Neglect psychosocial factors such as workload stress, poor work organisation, or lack of support, which can worsen fatigue.

Assume all workers are equally alert—individual needs vary, so have flexibility where possible.

Overlook environmental factors like poor lighting, excessive noise, or uncomfortable workstations that contribute to fatigue.

## MANAGING RISKS – Points to Remember...

**Consult workers and HSRs.** Establish Health and Safety Committees with at least 50% representation from workers. Encourage feedback, especially on any changes.

**Consider how long, how often and how severely workers are exposed to hazards.** The longer, more often and worse the low job control, the higher the risk that workers may be harmed.

**Utilise surveys and tools to assess psychosocial risks** in the workplace, particularly for businesses with over 20 employees.

**Establish a system for workers to report their concerns**, while ensuring anonymity as an option and treating their concerns with respect and seriousness to encourage reporting. Workers should know HOW to report a concern, risk or hazard and WHO to approach if assistance is needed.



**Observe work and behaviours**, such as prolonged work duration, excessive paperwork, or customer frustration, which may indicate low job control.

**Review available information**, including employee retention, incident reports, complaints, time-off records, injuries, incidents, and workers' compensation to identify potential hazards.

**Identify other hazards present and evaluate how they may interact or combine to create new, heightened risks.** For instance, high job demands could pose a greater risk in workplaces with low job control if workers are unable to take breaks or switch tasks to manage fatigue.

**Continuously monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of risk management strategies** to ensure that they are reducing the risk of injury and adjust them as needed, including access to improvement/suggestion forms for workers. If a review indicates that the current measures are inadequate or failing, immediately take steps to identify and establish new measures to mitigate the risks.

### MIND YOUR HEAD: RESOURCES

***Mind Your Head* has compiled a suite of resources to help you address Psychosocial Hazards in your Workplace**

1. [\*\*The Step-by-Step Guide to Addressing Psychosocial Hazards in the Workplace\*\*](#) will take you through each step of the process, including identifying hazards, assessing risks, controlling risks using best practice (the Hierarchy of Control) and reviewing control measures.
2. [\*\*The Psychosocial Hazards Workplace Survey\*\*](#) can be used to assist in identifying hazards in your workplace, including assessing the level of risk.
3. [\*\*Mind Your Head's Example Action Plan\*\*](#) demonstrates a completed Risk Assessment, with interventions and controls listed. You can also access examples of implementation strategies for every intervention listed via this document. [\*\*The Action Plan Template\*\*](#) can be used for your own workplace, based on the above example.
4. [\*\*Hierarchy of Controls Guides\*\*](#) for each recognised psychosocial hazard are available to assist you in choosing appropriate Control Measures for your workplace.