

Sleep for Nights and Rotating Shifts

Practical sleep strategy for schedules that don't follow the sun

I spent 18 years in emergency services, from the 911 dispatch floor to the ambulance, the helicopter, and the emergency department, and a lot of those hours were overnight. I know that “keep a regular sleep schedule” can sound like a joke when your schedule changes every week. This guide is built for the schedule you actually have.

How your body clock works

Your brain runs on an internal clock that expects sleep at night and alertness during the day. Light is its strongest signal. Working nights asks that clock to run backward, and it rarely adjusts all the way, especially when you flip back to days on your days off. The goal is not a perfect clock. The goal is protecting enough good sleep, and staying safe when you are tired.

Five things that matter most

- 1 Control your light.** Get bright light early in your shift. On the drive home, wear dark sunglasses, even on cloudy mornings, so the morning sun doesn't tell your brain the day has started.
- 2 Make your bedroom a cave.** Blackout curtains or a sleep mask, a cool room (around 65°F), and steady background noise from a fan or white noise machine. Phone on Do Not Disturb, with exceptions only for the people who truly need to reach you.
- 3 Protect an anchor.** Try to keep a block of about four hours that you sleep at the same time on work days and days off. It gives your clock something to hold onto. Some weeks it won't be possible, and that's OK.
- 4 Time your caffeine.** Use it early in the shift, when it helps most. Stop about 6 hours before you plan to sleep. Caffeine at 5 a.m. is still working at 11 a.m.
- 5 Nap on purpose.** A longer afternoon nap before a night shift, ideally around 90 minutes, cuts overnight sleepiness. On shift, a 20-minute nap helps where it's allowed. Give yourself about 15 minutes to shake off the grogginess before you drive or make critical decisions.

A sample day on a 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. night shift

Time	What to do
7:00 a.m.	Shift ends. Sunglasses on for the drive home.
7:45 a.m.	Light snack if you're hungry, shower, screens down, phone on Do Not Disturb.
8:15 a.m.	In bed. Dark, cool, quiet room.
3:30 p.m.	Up. Get outside light if you can.
5:00 p.m.	Main meal of the day.
7:00 p.m.	Shift starts. Bright light and caffeine are fine here. Do your hardest thinking work early if you have a choice.
2:00 a.m.	Last caffeine of the night.
2:00 to 6:00 a.m.	Small, light snacks only. This is when your gut is least ready for a big meal.

Slide the times to fit your schedule. The pattern matters more than the exact clock.

Switching between nights and days

- **Going onto nights:** sleep in the morning before your first night, then take a long afternoon nap.
- **Coming off nights:** after your last shift, sleep only 3 to 4 hours, get up, get daylight, and go to bed at a normal time that night. It's a rough day, but it resets you faster than sleeping the whole day away.
- **Rotating shifts:** if you have any say, rotating forward (days, then evenings, then nights) is easier on your body than rotating backward.
- **24-hour shifts:** sleep when calls allow, and protect your sleep the next day. Sleep broken up by calls still counts, but it is not the same as a full night. After the tones wake you, expect 15 to 30 minutes of grogginess, called sleep inertia, and double-check yourself during that window.

The drive home

For many night workers, the most dangerous part of the shift is the drive home. If you catch yourself drifting, missing exits, or not remembering the last few miles, pull over somewhere safe and nap for 20 minutes, or call for a ride. Cold air and a loud radio do not fix drowsy driving.

What helps and what backfires

WHAT HELPS	WHAT BACKFIRES
• The same short wind-down routine every time • Blackout curtains and white noise • Telling your household your sleep hours; a sign on the door and the doorbell off • A light snack before bed if you're hungry • Exercise, just not right before sleep	• Alcohol as a sleep aid. It helps you fall asleep but breaks up the second half of your sleep. • Scrolling in bed • A big meal right before sleep • Over-the-counter sleep aids like diphenhydramine. They leave you groggy and stop working with regular use. • Staying up all day on your first day off to "catch up"

A word about melatonin

Melatonin can help some shift workers fall asleep during the day. Low doses, often 0.5 to 3 mg taken shortly before your daytime sleep, tend to work as well as high doses. Supplements are not regulated like medications, so quality varies. Please check with me before starting, especially if you take other medications.

When to talk with me

- Trouble sleeping, or trouble staying awake, that lasts more than a few weeks and follows your schedule. This is called shift work disorder, and it is treatable.
- Loud snoring, gasping, or someone noticing you stop breathing in your sleep. Sleep apnea is common in first responders and worth checking.
- Nodding off while driving, or near misses.
- Needing alcohol, cannabis, or sleep aids most nights to get to sleep.
- Poor sleep alongside low mood, anxiety, irritability, or nightmares.

There are good options, with and without medication. Cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) is the first-line treatment for long-term insomnia and can be adapted to shift schedules. Sometimes simply changing when you take a medication you're already on makes a real difference.

If you are struggling

If you are thinking about suicide or are in crisis, call or text **988** any time. Veterans, press **1**. If you are in immediate danger, call **911**.

About the author: Dr. Ellen M. Riccio is a dual board-certified psychiatric and family nurse practitioner. Before advanced practice she spent 18 years in emergency services as a 911 telecommunicator, paramedic, prehospital registered nurse, flight nurse, and emergency department nurse.