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Abhishek Rana wakes up at seven in the evening, brushes his teeth and takes a hurried shower. This is the time when he gets ready for work and when he leaves home the streetlights are just starting to come on. At a time when people are returning home, Rana's late night shift begins. As late as 8 pm. Cups of coffee and tea and four to five cigarettes keep him going through the graveyard hours. When he returns early in the morning, the day is starting to begin for others. His eyelids almost drooping, Abhishek sees joggers, milkmen and newspaper boys...

A Delhi-based call centre executive, Rana is aged 25 but looks 35. Dark circles around the eyes, grey hair and dead skin have stolen the sheen of his youth. His taste buds have forgotten the taste of food but he weighs 90 kilograms and suffers from ulcers. His job has affected his social life too. When his friends are usually at a movie or a party he's usually busy at office.

Rana is among the many people doing the graveyard grind. They have no option but to work the nights because of the nature of their work. BPOs, software units, hospitals, law and order,

media houses, airlines... The list of sectors where night shifts are mandatory is very long. A study conducted by the Indian council for research on international economic relations revealed that in the coming decade India will have to spend \$200 billion on curing the health problems of BPO employees working in the night shift.

Experience speaks

"My working time is from eight to two in the morning. I sleep during the day and thus compensate. I don't have any health problems as of now but a sudden change in the routine will upset the balance", says a media person associated with the desk of a news agency.

Doctors say that normal sleep is as necessary for the human body as food and water. As the moon cannot be substituted for the sun, nocturnal sleep cannot be substituted with daytime sleep.

"I will get out of this hell as soon as I get another good dayjob. I crave for a sound sleep when I sit before the computer answering calls from distant countries. My health problems are migraine and drowsiness and I have spent a lot of money on treatments", discloses a young graduate who is working for a call centre in Delhi.

Shift lag happens when a

shift change affects the normal rhythm of the body. "It is like jet lag. Our body has a biological rhythm, which is tuned according to day and night and because of this you can never compensate nocturnal sleep with daytime sleep. Pilots are given a full day's leave from duty after night flying for the same reason", says Dr. Pushpendra N Renjen, Senior Neurologist, Apollo hospital.

Experts speak

Doctors are unanimous in the opinion that the biological clock functions according to the normal-day night change. This is also called the circadian rhythm. Sleep, heartbeat, blood pressure, body temperature, hormone production, and appetite are coordinated with this rhythm. The hypothalamus (a region of the brain, between the thalamus and the midbrain) controls these functions.

SMILE through the graveyard grind

More people are on night shifts than ever before, and as a result of this health problems are also on the rise. Read on to find out what your risks are if you work past the witching hour and how you can minimise these



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“Employees doing night shifts face both psychological and neurological problems. Chances of epilepsy are higher among those who work in graveyard shifts. If patients with history of epilepsy work during nights the frequency of fits increases. One of my patients is working in a call centre and she has complained of increase in the frequency of seizures. A normal person will also suffer from neuro problems if his or her sleep pattern is disturbed,” adds Dr. Renjen.

Doctors say that disorder in sleep pattern and constant staring at the computer monitor affect the eyes also. “Typically, the eyes become red, congested and itchy and often the vision becomes foggy after prolonged work. Along with this there may be headaches, neck pain and watering of eyes. These are symptoms of a well defined entity now called Computer Vision Syndrome,” says Dr. Sanjay Dhawan, Senior Consultant Eye Surgeon, Max hospital, New Delhi.

Here are some of the common health problems that are affecting those doing night shifts.

Insomnia: After a prolonged night shift some people suffer from insomnia. They will fail to get a sound sleep even after repeated attempts.

Drowsiness: Overall tiredness is caused by pain and weakness of muscles. This will be followed by fibromyalgia, an ailment that causes body pain.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you're on the graveyard shift, read on...

Make sure lighting is good when you work

Never do more than two shifts continuously

Avoid snacks and strictly adhere to meals three times a day

This will help you avoid acidity, constipation and ulcer

Drink at least two litres of water daily

Consume more fibrous food. Increase the intake of fruits and vegetables.

Avoid spicy and fatty foods

Avoid taking food after midnight

Reduce the intake of coffee and tea

Sleep just before starting work; this will help you stay fresh

Try to sleep for 30 minutes during working hours if possible and resume work thereafter

Obesity: This is caused when sleeplessness affects the production of hormones that control appetite and glucose production. Snacks intake during working hours and lack of exercise

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SMILE

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increase the risk of obesity. Cholesterol problems and metabolic syndrome are also high among night shift employees. Besides these, women are vulnerable to irregular periods and all doing night shifts could suffer from diabetes and low immunity

Since night shift employees sleep all through the day their social life is also affect-

ed. "Night shifts take away both days and nights from your life. I am not able to attend any social functions like marriages during the day, as I worry about my sleep. When my friends invite me for a party in the evening, I will be at office," says a call centre executive.

If you are a night shift employee, what you can do is keep a tab on your health by following medical advice. "If you can escape from a night shift job do it immediately as day is day and night is night," advises Dr Renjen. ■

WHEN SLEEP IS A MUST DURING THE DAY

You need your sleep before you do your night shifts. How do you manage it?

Convince your friends and relatives about the nature of your work. This will help you sleep without hindrances during daytime

Avoid liquor, coffee, tea and cigarette before sleeping

Reduce the intensity of day-

light by using curtains in the bedroom

Follow your sleep timetable

Switch off your mobile phone while sleeping

You can use earplugs if sound disturbance persists

Take a bath in lukewarm water after applying oil on the head

Avoid sleeping pills