

EXECUTIVE HEALTH

Burning the Candle at Both Ends



Killer carbs and colas:
 Recipe for a health disaster

MONEY SHARMA

It's time to get a grip on when your workday begins and when it ends, especially if you keep erratic hours. BY SAUMYA BHATTACHARYA

For years, Kishen Paswan, 35, had, like most officegoers, kept to a routine of 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. So six months ago, when he decided to join WNS Global Services, a business process outsourcing (BPO) firm, in Mumbai, he was well aware of the changed work timings — 6.30 p.m. to 3.30 in the morning — but hardly about its effects on his health. After just a couple of days into the new job, Paswan was confused, sleep-deprived and fatigued. "I felt horrible and my fam-

ily was very concerned," he says.

Rachna Khanna-Singh, lifestyle expert and psychologist at Artemis Health Institute in Gurgaon, ascribes Paswan's problems to his changed body clock. A body clock not in sync "can trigger a string of problems," she says.

Outfits like WNS are abreast of such problems among the BPO workforce. In fact, WNS periodically conducts chat sessions with medical experts, employee counselling, pre-shift and post-shift exercises, power

yoga and dance workshops to help its employees overcome the ill-effects of erratic hours. "The overall growth and development of an employee is a significant part of our employee proposition," says Karthik Sarma, WNS's Chief People Officer.

While health experts like Khanna-Singh endorse the benefits of such in-house measures, they say the prescription to deal with odd working hours extends beyond life at work.

The initial ill-effects of working

erratic hours are confusion and bouts of anger followed by insomnia. "When an erratic lifestyle prolongs, chronic pain and aches start to occur and mental symptoms, too, get exaggerated," says Khanna-Singh. High blood pressure, ulcers and cardiovascular diseases typically follow.

Last year, Harvard researchers identified the potential cause of the increased risk for cardiovascular and metabolic disease in shift workers. Hormonal and metabolic changes arising from working irregular shifts "could explain the increased risk for obesity, high BP, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease," the researchers had pointed out.

But shift workers are not the only ones at risk. "Those who work odd, irregular hours are equally at risk," says Ajay Pal Singh, psychiatrist at Max Healthcare, New Delhi. Another category of professionals at great risk are those addicted to social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Singh says he knows of professionals who constantly update their social network profiles late into the night "little realising the havoc it can play with their health. There's no alternative to a night's sound sleep."

Even otherwise, the truth is that

7 STEPS TO LIFESTYLE MODIFICATION

- 1** Stick to a routine. You may not like to go back to sleep immediately after working late in the night, but routine helps
- 2** Avoid alcohol, cola drinks and cigarettes. Stay away from caffeine four hours before you sleep
- 3** After working a late night, don't exercise vigorously before going to sleep
- 4** Don't eat spicy, high-calorie food at night. A glass of warm milk will help induce sleep
- 5** If you stay up late and sleep during the day, have your first meal consisting mostly of vegetables, salads and fruit
- 6** Sleep and wake up at the same time every day. Also take adequate sleep
- 7** Drink water to avoid dehydration. This will also help avoid headaches

many professionals barely get five to six hours of sleep every day and wade through their typical work day with seven to eight cups of coffee. While this might help achieve professional goals, these people are putting their health in serious jeopardy. Take the example of Rakesh Kumar, a senior manager in a leading telecom services company. While the 40-something Kumar starts his day at 8 a.m., he does not know when it will end. "I cannot afford to work any less. I have targets to meet," he says. He makes do with just four to five hours of sleep on most days.

Singh, the Max psychiatrist, has advice for the likes of Kumar. First, figure out a routine. "Sleeping and waking up at a fixed hour everyday helps," says Singh. Two, avoid caffeine at least four hours before sleep (see *7 Steps to Lifestyle Modification*). "People like Kumar would do themselves a favour by avoiding carbohydrates while working late hours," adds Singh.

Are organisations doing enough to deal with the issue of erratic work hours? Perhaps not. "Young managers are burning out fast across organisations. Unfortunately, Indian organisations do not put enough emphasis on health," says Nina Chatrath, Senior Consultant at executive search firm Korn/Ferry International, who heads for an evening walk in the Lodhi Gardens in Delhi on all five working days. Organisations would do well to understand the gravity of the situation, as business stakes are too high, especially at senior levels, she adds.

Young managers could, perhaps, take a cue from how Paswan of WNS reclaimed his life. Three months into his BPO job, he began to religiously adhere to advice from his employer: no TV after work and at least six hours of sleep. He now uses the two-day weekly break to fight off stress and recoup his energies. ☺



RACHIT GOSWAMI

WNS's Kishen Paswan: Wiser after shifts took a toll of his health