

Background

Shifting the balance

It is estimated that shift workers make up 17% of the world's workforce, and that figure is rising to **accommodate** the growing 24-hour culture. But is working shifts bad for your health? Well, if you are a woman then the answer might well be 'yes'. Recent research in Denmark suggests that women who work shifts, especially night shifts, are more likely to be forced into early retirement than men.

There has long been concern that shift work can be linked to a range of health problems, including increased risk of heart disease, breast cancer, peptic ulcers, sleep disturbance, complications in pregnancy and accidents. As well as the obvious factors like lack of sleep and sunlight **deprivation**, poor diet and lack of exercise have also been blamed for this ill-health. 'Shift workers tend to snack rather than eat **square meals**,' says Dr Nina Del Mastro, a doctor who has researched the effects of shift work on health problems. 'This means their meals tend to be high in fat and caffeine and they often don't get their daily allowance of vitamins.' A study into the effects of shift work on health, reported that 77% of extended-hours workers said they were getting no regular exercise. The Danish study suggested that more women than men are forced to retire early due to health problems and 34% of those women had regularly done shift work. However, the research was unable to come up with a reason why women should be more affected by working irregular or extended hours. One theory suggests that when men

go home after a night shift they sleep or relax in front of the television but women are expected to do the domestic **chores** once they have got home from a long nights' work. This means that they are effectively doing two jobs and not getting enough sleep.

Dr Del Mastro has advice for employers who use shift workers. 'Employers can help their staff avoid the problems caused by working nights by making night shifts more pleasant,' she says. Responsible employers schedule shifts to allow sufficient breaks and days off so that employees both get enough sleep and can also deal with their personal lives. Having good quality lights to **simulate** daylight can help to keep workers feeling fresh throughout the shift. Making sure there is quality food available for their staff is another measure Dr Del Mastro suggests. If the staff are eating properly they will be more **alert** and healthier. If the company can't afford catering, then they should at least provide a microwave and refrigerator or a vending machine with healthy products. Workers would also benefit from regular exercise during their shift. 'It doesn't have to be much,' explains Del Mastro, 'a quick walk during the break will help to **revive** tired limbs and minds.' Finally, workers can also benefit from training on how best to cope with the **inevitable** changes to their bodies and social lives.

If employers are worried about the cost of this, they should remember that a healthier workforce is a more productive workforce, so they will see a return on their investment.

Exercises

1 Work with a partner. Answer these questions.

- 1 Have you ever worked shifts? Did you enjoy it? Why / why not?
- 2 Do many people work shifts in your country? What kind of jobs do these people do?
- 3 What do you think are the pros and cons of working shifts?
- 4 Do you think working shifts could be bad for your health? Why / why not?

2 Read the text quickly and find out if any of your ideas from questions 3 and 4 above are mentioned in the text.

3 Read the text again and decide if the statements are true (T) or false (F).

- 1 Shift work appears to affect men's health less than that of women.
- 2 Almost one fifth of workers work shifts.
- 3 Female shift workers generally have a poorer diet than men.
- 4 Women usually get to relax after working their shift.
- 5 Employers will benefit from helping to improve the health of their shift workers.

4 Work with a partner and follow the instructions.

- **Student A:** Read the text to look for reasons why shift work is unhealthy.
Student B: Read the text to look for advice to make shift work more healthy.
- When you have both finished, tell your partner the information in your own words.

5 Match the words in bold in the text to definitions 1–8.

- 1 provide what somebody wants or needs: _____
- 2 food that makes you feel satisfied: _____
- 3 jobs that are not interesting but that you must do: _____
- 4 when something cannot be avoided or prevented from happening: _____
- 5 watching, listening, etc. for something with all your attention: _____
- 6 give the same effect as something else: _____
- 7 suffer something being taken away: _____
- 8 make somebody or something strong or healthy again: _____

6 Work with a partner. Try to use each word in a sentence about yourself.

7 Look back at the text and choose three words that you could use in your day-to-day work.

8 What do you think of the advice in the text? Does your company follow any of the advice?