Alcohol, Caffeine, and Sleeping Pills: What Shiftworkers Need to Know

The Drug: Alcohol – A Depressant Drug

Examples: Beer, wine, spirits, coolers

Effects of the Drug: Impaired judgement, slowed reflexes, impaired motor function, sleepiness or drowsiness

Concerns: Consumed in large quantities, alcohol can lead to coma and if overdosed (alcohol poisoning) may be fatal. Alcohol has been causally linked to 66 diseases including cancer, gastrointestinal disease, diabetes, and perinatal risks (e.g., fetal alcohol spectrum disorder). Alcohol, tobacco and blood pressure are the top three leading risk factors for people living in developed countries.

General Recommendation:
- Don’t drink alcohol during work hours—it is not only a problem or dangerous for yourself but your co-workers too.
- If you are a social drinker, follow the Low Risk Drinking Guidelines.
- Do not mix alcohol with other drugs (and many medications well).
- If you are a heavy drinker and it is starting to interfere with your life, seek help. Call FourCast at 876-1292.

Advice for Shiftworkers:
- Because alcohol is a depressant, you may think it will help you relax and fall asleep but it can interrupt sleep, preventing you from waking up fully rested.
- Avoid drinking alcohol after work, especially if you plan to go to sleep soon after.

The Drug: Caffeine – A Stimulant Drug

Examples: Coffee, tea, caffeinated soft drinks, chocolate, cocoa, stay-awake pills, some over-the-counter medications

Effects of the Drug: Speeds up the central nervous system; elevated mood, overactivity, tension/anxiety, rapid heartbeat, constriction of blood vessels

Concerns: If you regularly drink more than 6 to 8 cups of coffee—or some other combination of caffeinated products—that adds up to more than 600 mg, you may have trouble sleeping, feel anxious, restless, and depressed, and develop stomach ulcers. Higher amounts can make you extremely agitated and give you tremors and a very rapid and irregular heartbeat.
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General Recommendation
- Try not to consume more than 300 mg of caffeinated products (about 3 cups of brewed coffee) in a day.
- If you are pregnant, it is strongly recommended that keep your caffeine intake below 300mg per day.

Advice for Shiftworkers
- Stop drinking coffee around 5 hours before bedtime. For shiftworkers, that may be soon after you leave work so avoid caffeine products mid-way through your evening or night shift and switch to water, juice and healthy, non-caffeinated snacks.

The Drug: Sleeping Pills and Tranquillizers – A Depressant Drug

Examples: Lorazepam (e.g., Ativan), alprazolam (e.g., Xanax), diazepam (e.g., Valium), temazepam (Restoril) and triazolam (e.g., Halcion).

Effects of the Drug: Unsteadiness or falling, feeling confused or not being able to concentrate, drowsiness or daytime sleeping, poor memory, difficulty breathing, dizziness, nausea or vomiting, headaches, constipation, changes in heart rate, irritability, feeling jittery, feeling down or “blue”, loss of consciousness.

Concerns: Combining these drugs with other depressants including alcohol can cause unconsciousness or even death (either by suicide or injury). Warning signs that you have taken too much include: severe drowsiness, slurred speech and weakness and staggering. If the drugs are taken for more than a few weeks, they can be addictive. Do not stop taking benzodiazepines (sleeping pills) without first consulting medical advice.

General Recommendation
- Generally considered safe when taken as directed by your doctor.
- Do not mix with alcohol or other drugs like cold, allergy and pain preparations, and other sleep medications.
- Do not take them if you need a clear head and fast responses, say to operate heavy machinery or drive a car.
- Pregnant women should avoid these drugs since they can pass through the placenta to the fetus.

Advice for Shiftworkers
- Sleeping aids are risky because of dependency problems. Use only as directed.
- Be cautious about creating an upper-downer cycle by using depressants at night and stimulants (e.g. caffeine) in the morning to increase alertness.
- Try a substance-free strategy to help you sleep (e.g., going to bed as soon as possible after working the night shift); and, having your bedroom simulate night time sleep (e.g., sound proof, dark, eye shades/ear plugs).