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Safety & Health

Nurses Working Rotating Night Shifts May Face Health Risks, Medical Researchers Say

By [Robert Iafolla](#)

Jan. 20 — A new study examining the health of nearly 75,000 nurses adds to the evidence that the risks associated with rotating night-shift work warrant protections for such employees, researchers told Bloomberg BNA.

Nurses who worked more than five years of rotating night shifts showed a significant increase in mortality rates compared with those who never worked the night shift, according to an [article](#) published online Jan. 6 in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

A team of international researchers found that mortality from all causes was 11 percent higher for women with six or more years of rotating night-shift work. Mortality from cardiovascular disease was 19 percent higher for nurses who worked six to 14 years of rotating night shifts and 23 percent higher for those who worked 15 or more years of rotating night shifts.

Grants from the National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, supported the research. The findings follow previous studies that found links between night-shift work and cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension and other adverse health conditions.

Night Work Considered Probable Carcinogen

The World Health Organization has categorized night-shift work as a probable carcinogen. The National Toxicology Program in 2012 selected shift work at night, light at night and circadian disruption as a candidate carcinogen in its Report on Carcinogens (77 Fed. Reg. 2728), Robin Mackar, a spokeswoman for the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, told Bloomberg BNA Jan. 15.

The WHO is also considering evaluating other health effects tied to shift work at night, light at night and circadian disruption, Mackar said.

"The nature of the work is that there has to be people working 24/7," Patrick Romano, a professor at the University of California-Davis School of Medicine, told Bloomberg BNA Jan. 16. "The question is how to organize it by what's safest for patients and health care providers."

Civil aviation and trucking present similar sleep-related issues, Romano said. But health care is traditionally a less regulated work environment than aviation and trucking, which increases the need for having evidence-based policies in place to mitigate the risks, Romano said.

'Policies Will Vary.'

The American Hospital Association doesn't have model policies or guidelines because of the wide variety of hospitals it represents, spokeswoman Marie Watteau told Bloomberg BNA Jan. 20.

"Policies will vary at different hospitals in order to meet the needs of their unique workforce," Watteau said.

Representatives from Kaiser Permanente and Tenet Healthcare declined to comment. Six other health care systems did not respond to Bloomberg BNA questions about policies designed to protect nurses from the adverse health effects linked to rotating night-shift work.

Consistency Is Crucial

The United Nurses and Allied Professionals, a union representing health-care workers in New England, addresses the risks of rotating night-shift work by making sure nurses don't have to work mandatory overtime, union President Linda McDonald told Bloomberg BNA Jan. 16. The union also tries to control the frequency and length of rotations with contractual language on scheduling requirements, McDonald said.

Schedules that are as consistent as possible and feature adequate recovery time after rotations are crucial because most nurses prefer to rotate rather than work permanently at night, American Nurses Association President Pamela Cipriano told Bloomberg BNA Jan. 16. Even nurses who choose permanent night shifts tend to get drawn off schedule during their off days, Cipriano said.

In addition, workplaces should have quiet areas with comfortable seating where nurses can recharge, Cipriano said.

"We see nothing wrong with a power nap at work," Cipriano said.

The American Nurses Association finalized a position statement in November on preventing fatigue and sleepiness. The position statement emphasizes the joint responsibility of nurses and their employers for reducing the risks of fatigue and sleepiness.

Risk of Errors Increases

Although the association's position statement mentions research showing links between shift work and long-term health problems, it focuses on short-term safety risks to nurses and patients due to the greater likelihood of errors, diminished problem-solving capacity, slower reaction time and other performance deficits.

The connections between rotating night-shift work and immediate safety risks are easier to establish than those of shift work and diseases, Michael Decker, a professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Nursing, told Bloomberg BNA Jan. 14.

Cause-and-effect relationships are especially difficult to prove, Decker said. For example, reduced production of melatonin that comes with night work has been cited as a possible reason for links between cancer and rotating night-shift work, Decker said. But the sleep disruption from rotations could also weaken the immune system such that it doesn't catch cancer cells, Decker said.

There are additional confounding factors, as night-shift workers tend to be heavier and more likely to smoke, he said.

"Is it the melatonin or the smoking?" Decker said. "It really becomes a web of intrigue to find out what factor is leading to increased deaths."

Healthy Eating Can Be a Challenge

While Decker emphasized that it's important to differentiate fatigue and sleepiness, he said some methods for preventing the former can help with the latter.

Kathryn Lee, a professor at the University of California-San Francisco School of Nursing, agrees that techniques for combating fatigue can be applied to sleepiness. Yet some recommended practices, like healthy eating and exercise, can be particularly challenging for nurses working night shifts, Lee told Bloomberg BNA.

"A lot of night nurses are obese. That's probably not the night shift itself, but the lack of good food choices available and the lack of physical activity," Lee said. "A lot of nurses would say, 'We're on our feet all night working, we don't need to exercise.' The work is very physical, but it's different than exercise."