Sleep for Shift Workers

Practical, evidence-informed changes for before, during, and after the shift. Cannot beat the biology, but you can protect the sleep you get.

Shift work is hard on sleep because it fights the two systems that drive it: sleep pressure and the body clock. You cannot fully solve the biology, but you can protect the sleep you get. These are the changes with the most evidence for shift workers.

Before your shift	During your shift	After your shift
Get a real block of daytime sleep. Blackout curtains or a sleep mask, cool room, phone on do not disturb.	Bright light during the shift, especially early. Cold water on your face when you feel a dip. Small, protein-forward snacks instead of a heavy meal.	Wear dark sunglasses on the drive home to protect the sleep signal. Eat lightly. Wind down the same way every time.
If sleeping in split blocks, anchor the longer block just before your shift.	Caffeine helps for the first half of the shift. Cut it 5-6 hours before you plan to sleep, or it will fragment your sleep.	Keep the bedroom dark, cool, and quiet. A fan or white noise blocks daytime household sounds.
A short pre-shift nap of 20-30 minutes can rescue an evening or night shift.	One 20-minute nap in the middle of a long night shift reduces errors and grogginess in the second half.	On days off, keep some structure. A hard swing back to a day schedule for two days and back to night is worse than a partial anchor.

If daytime sleepiness affects safety at work, driving, or quality of life, please talk with a clinician. Shift work sleep disorder is a real diagnosis and it is treatable. Cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) is the first-line treatment for chronic insomnia and works even for shift workers.

Learn more: Sleep Hygiene at shrinkdaily.com/concept/sleep-hygiene