

Emergency Nurse Duty Hours and Safety Position Statement





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Emergency Nurse Duty Hours and Safety

Description

Globally, emergency nurses work a variety of schedules, including rotations between daylight and darkness and a range of time intervals. It is not uncommon for nurses to work for multiple employers, attend school, and have family or childcare responsibilities. Despite copious evidence about the deleterious effects of fatigue, nurses often consider it “part of the job” and regard themselves as “supernurses” who are immune to the risks to themselves and their patients (Steege & Rainbow, 2017). While the number of hours worked and rest periods between shifts are federally regulated for industries such as airline pilots, truck drivers, and railroad workers in the U.S. (Occupational Safety and Health Administration [OSHA], n.d.-a, Limitations on Work Hours), the healthcare arena has been slow to adopt similar regulations. The European Union has very specific regulations on hours worked per week, hours at night, time off during the year, and medical screenings for night shift workers (European Union, 2024). In the U.S., some states have laws limiting nursing overtime and work hours, but there are no federal laws or regulations in this regard (Nurse Overtime and Patient Safety Act of 2024, 2024; OSHA, n.d.-a, Limitation on Work Hours). Most U.S. hospitals have transitioned to 12-hour shifts for nurses, yet OSHA defines more than eight hours as an “extended shift” (OSHA, n.d.-a). There are factors in addition to shift length and time off between shifts that contribute to fatigue, such as night shift hours, total hours worked, commute time, and personal activities (Gander et al., 2020; Gurubhagavatula et al., 2021; James et al., 2020).

Appropriate emergency nurse staffing is critical to ensuring the delivery of safe, quality care. However, the solution to staffing issues is not simply increasing the number of hours worked (American Nurses Association, 2020). It is well documented in the literature that longer shifts correlate with higher levels of staff burnout and fatigue, and nurses’ shift length is significantly associated with both patient and employee satisfaction (Bae, 2021; Caruso et al., 2019; Cho & Steege, 2021).

Fatigue decreases a nurses’ ability to respond to patient situations in an effective manner, with deviations from standards of practice contributing to procedural errors (Bae, 2021). Even more notable is the relationship between nurses’ shift length and nurse-reported quality and safety measures (Caruso et al., 2019; Stimpfel et al., 2012). Burnout and job dissatisfaction are more than two and a half times higher in nurses working shifts over eight hours (Stimpfel et al., 2012). The unpredictable patient load and acuity in emergency care settings leads to environmental turbulence, which is both mentally and physically taxing. This places emergency nurses at risk for physical and mental fatigue, burnout, and errors. In addition, high work demands impair the ability to recover from fatigue (Gifkins et al., 2020). Fatigue can take many forms, such as fatigue from lack of rest and/or meal periods during a shift or fatigue from the stress of the job, which can lead to compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue can have deleterious consequences that directly impact patient safety and satisfaction as well as the nurses’ own health (Emergency Nurses Association, 2020).

ENA Position

It is the position of the Emergency Nurses Association (ENA) that

1. It is the responsibility of the emergency nurse to self-monitor and ensure adequate rest between scheduled work assignments and to prioritize sleep.
2. It is optimal for an emergency nurse to not work a shift longer than eight hours, with a minimum of ten hours off between shifts.

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3. Factors such as night shift hours, total hours worked, commute time, and others are considered, in addition to maximum shift length and minimum time off between shifts, when attempting to mitigate adverse health effects and fatigue-related risks.
4. Emergency nurses and employers collaborate to implement strategies to prevent and mitigate fatigue.
5. Employers staff accordingly to avoid unstaffed shifts, open shifts, extended shifts, or overtime that would extend a nurse past 12 consecutive hours of work or 12 hours of work in a 24-hour period.
6. Mandatory overtime is an unacceptable and unsafe approach to achieving appropriate staffing levels.
7. Employers and nurses acknowledge the importance of well-rested personnel through the implementation of evidence-based fatigue risk management strategies.
8. Emergency nurses participate in the development of policies and procedures, including scheduling practices and work practices that contribute to a safe, effective, and healthy work environment.
9. ENA supports ANA's *Principles for Nurse Staffing*.

Background

It is imperative that emergency nurses remain alert in order to provide safe care, and it is vital that emergency nurses recognize changes in patient conditions, initiate appropriate and timely interventions, and prevent potentially dangerous errors in medication and procedural orders. Fatigue and sleep deprivation are linked to decreased attentiveness, memory, information processing, reaction time, and effectiveness of decision-making. Unfortunately, nurses cannot accurately assess their own level of fatigue (Cochran et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2019). Nurses also downplay the significance of fatigue on their performance (Steege & Rainbow, 2017). Thus, it is important that emergency nurses, as well as employers, understand the importance of well-rested personnel and include regular education on the effects of fatigue on patient safety, nurses' mental health, and nurses' well-being as part of establishing and maintaining a healthy work environment.

Factors related to adequate rest include the amount of rest, the time rest occurs, the quality of rest, and the neurobiological pressure to sleep (Gurubhagavatula et al., 2021). Adverse events such as needlestick injuries and errors increase with the impaired cognitive function associated with long hours, night shift work, and minimum rest between shifts (Clendon & Gibbons, 2015; James et al., 2020; Lo et al., 2016).

The 12-hour shifts worked by many emergency nurses are associated with frequent overtime, difficulties staying awake on duty, reduced sleep times, and increased risk for error (McElroy et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2019). Involuntary overtime or overtime agreed to by nurses because of coercion or a sense of duty contributes to nurses working when exhausted, poor work-life balance, and increased turnover (Karhula et al., 2020; Nogues & Tremblay, 2023; Watanabe & Yamauchi, 2019). Nurses working 12-hour shifts sleep less and experience less efficacious sleep when compared to nurses working 8-hour shifts (Rhéaume & Mullen, 2017). Nurses working extended shifts and long hours—more than 40 hours a week with insufficient sleep—are at greater risk for making errors (Bae, 2021; Caruso et al., 2019; Son et al., 2019) than those working regular hours. These errors can be related to medication administration, omission of care, or failure to rescue (Wilson et al., 2019).

Evidence shows that staying awake for 17 hours is functionally equivalent to having a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.05%, and staying awake for 24 hours equates to a BAC of 0.10% (Williamson & Feyer, 2000). One study found that sleep loss had a more potent sedative effect than alcohol ingestion, with comparable psychomotor impairment (Roehrs et al., 2003).

Extended hours can also result in the nurse falling asleep while driving, which endangers the nurse and others (Caruso et al., 2019; Gander et al., 2020; McElroy et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020). Extended hours increase the probability of burnout, which can lead to leaving the emergency department or the nursing profession entirely (Stimpfel et al., 2012). Working chronic extended hours can cause compassion fatigue, which results in a lack of empathy for patients and decreased patient satisfaction (ENA, 2020).

There is evidence of a direct relationship between working more than 12 hours at a time or more than 40 hours in a week and nurses' health (Rodriguez Santana et al., 2020; Son et al., 2019). Working the night shift can cause circadian discordance, resulting in alterations in insulin regulation and inflammation-related proteins, which could lead to chronic health problems such as diabetes and obesity (McDermott et al., 2024). Shift work during hours when biological sleep would normally occur, as well as longer work hours, increases the risk for chronic fatigue and reduced job performance and contributes to obesity, injuries, and a wide range of chronic diseases (Caruso et al., 2019; Gurubhagavatula et al., 2021; McElroy et al., 2020; Rainbow et al., 2024; Rittenschober-Bohm et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). In one study, nurses working 12-hour night shifts had predicted cognitive ineffectiveness in the elevated risk zone by the 8th hour of their shift and in the high-risk zone, equivalent to a blood alcohol concentration greater than 0.08, by the end of their shift (James et al., 2020).

Fatigue and exhaustion are issues for nurses of all ages who work extended hours. However, older nurses may choose to change jobs, retire earlier, and be less likely to return to per diem positions if the only choice is 12-hour shifts (Suter et al., 2020). The loss of these nurses from the workforce exacerbates the nursing shortage and contributes to the loss of experienced and knowledgeable nurses.

It is important for healthcare leaders to work with nurses to ensure that measures are in place to facilitate adequate rest between shifts, provide meal breaks and rest periods, and address the underlying causes of extended shifts and inadequate staffing. Nurses with more input and control of their work schedule can better recover from fatigue (Gifkins et al., 2020). Countermeasures can reduce, but not eliminate, fatigue-related adverse outcomes (Gurubhagavatula et al., 2021). These include adjusting shift schedules; napping; caffeine use; sleep hygiene, including treatment of sleep disorders; medications to promote wakefulness and sleep; exposure to bright or blue light; exercise and activity breaks; mind-body interventions; sleep hygiene education; and fatigue prediction, detection, and warning technologies (Gurubhagavatula et al., 2021; Patterson et al., 2018a; Son et al. 2019; Tout et al., 2024).

Evidence-based guidelines created for fatigue mitigation in emergency medical services (EMS) providers defined the population of interest as "...shift workers whose job activity requires multiple episodes of intense concentration and attention to detail per shift, with serious adverse consequences potentially resulting from lapses in concentration" (Patterson et al., 2018b, p. 10) and specifically identified nurses as a similar worker group. While there are differences in working conditions between EMS and hospital-based emergency nurses, some of the same strategies can be used by both populations. These include using fatigue/sleepiness survey instruments to assess fatigue, access to caffeine, the opportunity to nap while on duty, and education about fatigue-related risks and fatigue mitigation (Patterson et al., 2018a). Nurses are not typically allowed to nap on duty, yet napping has been shown to decrease acute fatigue and improve performance and information processing (Martin-Gill et al., 2018; Querstret et al., 2020).

Awareness and acknowledgment of the deleterious effects of fatigue are key to changing the professional culture leading nurses to work when fatigued and decline opportunities for rest (Steege & Rainbow, 2017). Education regarding the deleterious effects of fatigue and sleep deprivation, along with countermeasures to manage fatigue are essential (Barger et al., 2018; Caruso et al., 2024; Patterson et al., 2018a; Smith et al., 2020). There is a freely available online educational program specific to nurses who work shifts and long hours (Caruso et al., 2024).

It is imperative that emergency nurses work collaboratively with leadership to explore ways to combat the negative effects of fatigue. Improving work environments requires changing professional and organizational culture. To mitigate the adverse consequences of fatigue, emergency nurses and leaders

need to be proactive not only in combating fatigue but also in acknowledging its effects on patient safety and the health of nursing staff. They also need to be working collaboratively to initiate strategies to improve staffing and nurses' health (Cochran et al., 2021; Son et al., 2019). Healthcare facilities need to evaluate practices and policies and invest in the well-being of their nursing staff, and this includes providing options for rest along with education about fatigue risks and mitigation strategies (Martin-Gill et al., 2018; Patterson et al., 2018a; Smith et al., 2020).

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