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Balancing Acts: Strategies for managing shiftwork for nurses, midwives and carers

Introduction

As a nurse, midwife or carer, shift work can offer benefits such as convenience and opportunities to make more money. However, such work can also be taxing on the body and overall health.

Prioritising your own wellbeing is critical to maintaining a positive mood, reducing mistakes and providing better healthcare to your patients.

The following articles have some great tips to help you prioritise your wellbeing. For more advice, go to: anmj.org.au



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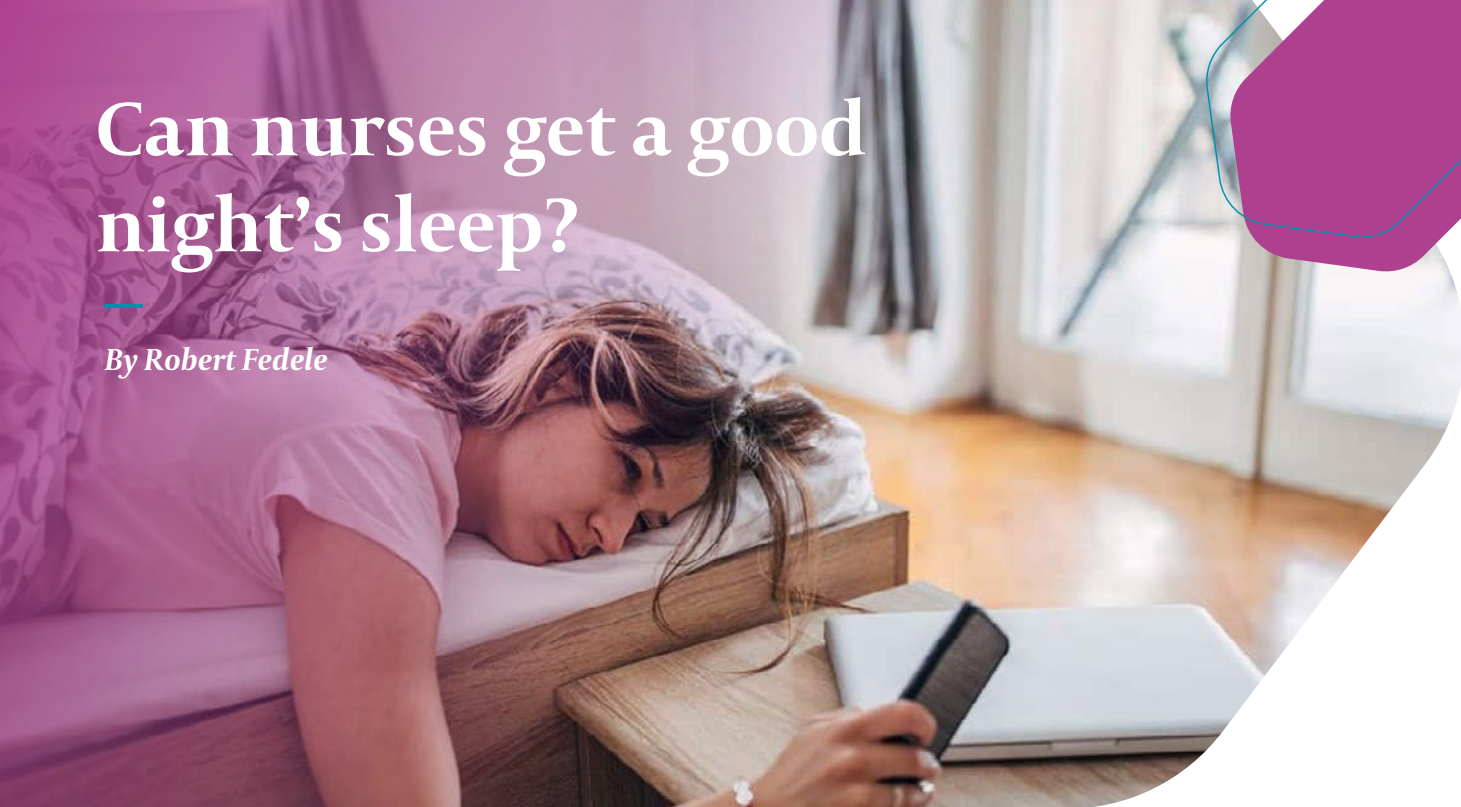
**NURSES
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Caring for the carers



Can nurses get a good night's sleep?

By Robert Fedele



Is healthy sleep achievable for nurses who work rotating shift work?

It's a thought-provoking question posed by Dr Lisa Matricciani, a sleep researcher and lecturer in Nursing at the University of South Australia.

According to the editorial, sleep is often-recognised as important for health and wellbeing but is usually the first thing people give up when life gets too busy. For nurses, who typically undertake rotating shift work throughout their careers, this is especially true. Some may accept poor sleep as inevitable, while others are on the constant hunt to unlock the key to improving sleep and reducing fatigue.

"For example, a lot of sleep recommendations focus on set fixed sleep and wake up times. For nurses and midwives working

"Sleep is important for everyone but for nurses, most of them are working rotating shift work, so there are some things that are out of their control," Dr Matricciani explains to the ANMJ.

rotating shift work, and even other disciplines, that's just not possible. One day you might be working a late shift and you finish at 9.30pm at night. Other times you might be working a night shift, so forming that consistent sleep schedule is really difficult."

Dr Matricciani's research into sleep has largely focused on children and how their sleep patterns, particularly duration and consistency, have changed over the years.

Now, with poor sleep among healthcare workers a growing area of interest, she is turning her attention to nurses.

The COVID-19 pandemic increased and highlighted the day-to-day demands of nursing and effects on sleep, the editorial states. The prevalence of sleep disturbances among healthcare workers and nursing students was 31% and 27% respectively, compared to 18% of the general population.

"Given that sleep is important for cognitive, emotional and physical wellbeing, sleep may be especially important for nurses – a demanding profession that often requires shift work – a known risk factor for poor sleep."

Dr Matricciani is currently embarking on several research projects focusing on sleep and nurses and nursing students, with the aim of improving healthy sleep across the profession.

Studies highlighted in the editorial show poor sleep has been associated with reduced quality of life, weight gain, hypertension, poorer cardiometabolic health, and diabetes among nurses. It also contributes to medical errors, reduced job productivity and burnout.

Dr Matricciani points to successful strategies to raise awareness of the importance of sleep such as Victoria's six-week 'Happy People at Work' wellness program, which promotes energy, mood, stress reduction, and sleep. Piloted in 2017 among 874 nurses and midwives, the trial found 59% of 807 respondents reported that they gained strategies to help with sleep, yet, 45% said they were still learning how to effectively apply strategies.

Another potential solution recommends nurses need to develop good sleep strategies early on in their careers, beginning at the undergraduate level. Part of Dr Matricciani's research is exploring ways to enhance student and new graduate nurses' awareness of sleep and its influence on health and work.

"It is possible that nurses who receive sleep education early on in their undergraduate training may be less likely to experience poor sleep during their graduate year and future career," the editorial states.

“Sometimes, the population as a whole, we often wear our sleep deprivation as a badge of honour, that we’re working really hard by not getting enough sleep,” Dr Matricciani tells the ANMJ.

“But actually, sleep is really important to make sure that we work efficiently and to the best of our abilities.

“What the literature seems to be suggesting is that people are not really aware of the importance of sleep and they lack strategies to achieve a good night’s sleep. Educating nurses early on in their careers on the importance of sleep hopefully means they’ll develop healthy habits throughout their career.”

Dr Matricciani shares her top five healthy sleep tips for nurses navigating the stressors of the job and shift work.

1. Create a comfortable sleep environment

Elements of a comfortable sleep environment include a comfortable mattress and pillow, and a dark quiet room at comfortable (cooler) temperature. The National Sleep Foundation suggests a room temperature of 18 degrees may be best.

2. Get sunlight, particularly early in the day

For nurses, particularly those who work 12-hour shifts and may drive to work and drive home when it is dark, try to go outside during your break if there are limited windows in your work environment.

3. Avoid bright lights and screen use close to bedtime

This might be especially important after an afternoon shift where people may watch television to help them relax and unwind. Most people stay awake to watch the end of a television program and this pre-bed activity, particularly if started later in the evening, may delay bedtimes and curtail sleep duration.

“Sometimes, the population as a whole, we often wear our sleep deprivation as a badge of honour, that we’re working really hard by not getting enough sleep,” Dr Matricciani tells the ANMJ.

4. Monitor your caffeine and alcohol intake

Caffeine promotes wakefulness and the effects may last 4-6 hours after consumption.

Consuming caffeine close to bedtime may make falling asleep difficult. Nurses may like to consider when they plan to go to sleep after an early, afternoon and night shift and thus avoid caffeine 4-6 hours prior. Alcohol also affects sleep. Although alcohol may help people fall asleep faster, it can disrupt sleep quality, which is also important for health and wellbeing.

5. Budget time for sleep

Consider your personal, work and family commitments and try to organise your time so that you prioritise time for sleep. The National Sleep Foundation suggests adults need 7-9 hours of sleep each night.



A dietitian's 5 ways to eat healthier on night shift for nurses and midwives

By Robert Fedele

Challenging workloads, staff shortages, missed breaks and shift work invariably impact the time nurses and midwives have to prepare and eat healthy meals.



Dr Michelle Rogers is an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) from South Australia with a PhD in Nutrition who was part of a joint research team for a study investigating weight loss strategies for nightshift workers.

The study explored the impact of intermittent energy restriction, specifically the 5:2 diet, as a weight-loss strategy for nightshift workers. Under the diet, five days of the week are normal eating days, while the other two restrict calories to 500-600.

The study, which included many nurses, involved a six-month weight loss phase, followed by 12-months of maintenance. Each individual was randomly placed on one of three diets and then worked with dietitians to implement the strategy into their everyday life.

“We worked with them to achieve the initial weight loss but also help set longer-term goals to keep that weight off,” Dr Rogers explained.

“We also discussed other issues they might be having at work. Lots of nurses and midwives say night shifts can be quite difficult, and they find themselves eating just because they are tired or just to stay awake. Other times it is the complete opposite; if it is a busy night, they're not eating at all.”

Dr Rogers said the study's objective was to improve the health and wellbeing of this important, yet vulnerable, cohort.

“We know that shift workers are at higher risk of having comorbidities, so being overweight but also having diabetes, heart disease and other conditions. We also know shift work requires individuals to eat and sleep out of synchronisation with our

traditional body clock, which says we eat during the day and sleep at night. Their routines are obviously difficult to keep and that can lead to disrupted eating and sleeping habits, with this circadian disruption resulting in metabolic consequences.”

“We know that even small decreases in weight improves metabolic responses. We want to help people achieve that, but we also want to help them sustain that behaviour change, especially in the shift work population, because routines are often difficult for this population to get into.”

Dr Rogers shares her top 5 ways nurses and midwives can eat healthier on night shift.

1. Food variety and preparation

A healthy diet should include foods from every food group each day. Ensuring a wide variety of different foods from every group increases your chances of taking in all the vitamins and minerals that your body needs for optimal nutrition and preventing lifestyle diseases and nutritional deficiencies.

Having a variety of food in your daily intake can be difficult, especially when on shift work: meal preparation can help you have nutritious food available even when you are on the run.

Menu/meal preparation does not have to be a time-consuming task – as little as 10 minutes a day can help.

Three key tips for being prepared; 1) Plan your week ahead of time with what meals and snacks you would like to take to work, 2) Pre-cut all fruit and vegetables at the start of the week and store in good quality air-tight containers – this will allow you to grab and go for some healthy snacks as well as form a base for salads or sandwich fillings, and 3) Keep it simple; this will keep the time needed and mental load for preparation to a minimum.

2. Focus on fibre

Consuming high fibre foods as part of your dietary intake can assist you in feeling fuller for longer, therefore helping to reduce the need to snack.

A diet high in fibre can also regulate glucose levels to keep them within a healthy range and reduce cholesterol levels.

There are two main types of fibre: soluble and insoluble. Insoluble fibre is found in wholegrain breads and cereals, wheat bran, wheat-based pasta and some vegetables. Soluble fibre is found in fruits, oats, barley, legumes and some vegetables. Trying to get a mix of fibre types in your diet will also help will regular bowel movements.

Tips for increasing fibre intake:

- Choose wholemeal or wholegrain breads.
- Eat wholemeal breakfast cereals. Weetbix, All-bran, muesli or porridge are excellent choices. You could make your own natural muesli using oats, nuts, seeds, dried fruits, other grains etc.
- Use brown rice and wholemeal noodles and pasta.
- In between meals, choose high fibre snacks such as fresh fruit, raw vegetables, wholegrain crackers, nuts, seeds and dried fruits.
- Eat plenty of fresh fruit and eat the whole fruit rather than drinking the juice – it has much the same nutrition but a lot more fibre.
- Try chopped raw vegetables eg. carrot, celery, capsicum, asparagus, snow peas to dip into salsa or hummus.
- Try for 5 serves of vegetables daily – in main meals, salads, soups, and added into baked goods if possible.

3. Snack vs meal

Will eating a meal while on night shift be the healthiest, or should you just have a snack? Or perhaps not eat at all? A recent clinical trial investigating the impact of eating a large meal, a snack or not eating during simulated nightshifts on hunger, gut reaction, sleepiness and mood found that a small snack during the night may protect shift workers from the increased sleepiness experienced after a large meal and the hunger experienced when not eating during the night.¹ Additional research has also shown that for optimal performance, shift workers should consider consuming main meals during the day and limit food consumption late at night.²

4. Look for low GI options

Eating a lower glycemic index (GI) diet can reduce average blood glucose levels and improve the body's ability to use glucose for energy. Low GI foods also improve satiety (feeling of fullness), which can assist with weight management, reduce snacking behaviour, and provide a slow release of energy during the course of your night shift.

Low GI foods include wholegrain breads, pasta, some breakfast cereals, sweet potato, legumes, milks, yoghurt and temperate fruits (fruits grown in areas with mild to warm summers and cool to cold winters; such as apple, pear, apricot, plum, kiwifruit, strawberry, raspberry & blueberry).

Some examples of high GI foods include; cakes, white bread, white rice, white pasta, most packaged cereals, croissants, and confectionery. Only consume these types of foods in moderation.

5. Caffeine

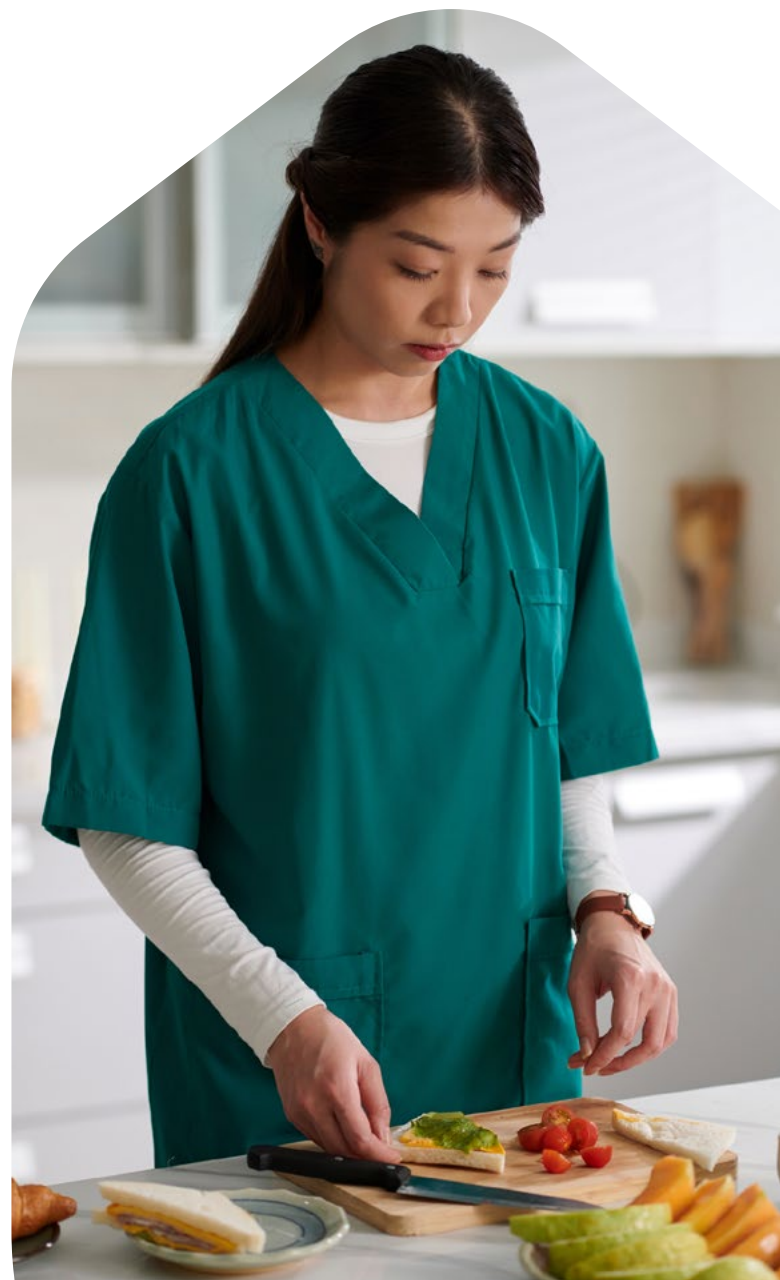
Night shift work is typically associated with reduced sleep and increased sleepiness. Caffeine has typically been used as a compensatory behaviour, but how much should we be having? Caffeine has positive effects on alertness and performance when consumed at low doses (3 mg/kg body weight/day; so for an individual weighing 60kg, this would be 180mg), and at moderate doses is considered an effective fatigue countermeasure. Research conducted in 2011,³ found that shift workers may be consuming more caffeine than would be useful for beneficial effects.

Typically, there is 60-80mg per 250ml of instant coffee and 60 – 120ml per 250ml of percolated coffee, so aiming for 1-2 cups of coffee per night will produce the most beneficial results for alertness and fatigue.

Large amounts of caffeine can also lead to increased urination- try to keep up non-caffeinated beverages such as water during the night shift to help keep you hydrated. Small sips frequently will help keep you hydrated.

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Work-life balance



By James Lloyd ANMF Federal Vice President

Work-life balance. This has become a cliché in our society. But despite its frequent use, this concept is still genuinely relevant to the lives of nurses, midwives and care workers.

Many of us are time-poor. We are constantly juggling different commitments in our busy lives, such as work, family, and personal needs. The Covid-19 pandemic has also changed how we live and work, adding that extra ball to juggle. The outcome of a mismatch between work and life commitment is stress – an impact on our physical and mental health – and decreased work performance and satisfaction.

Australia is slowly falling behind the rest of the developed world in our attempts to balance work and personal lives. Simply put, a good work-life balance means that all aspects of living are in equilibrium or harmony – your work supports your non-work life and vice versa.

So, does your work compete with your caring responsibilities? Does it interfere with your need to attend medical appointments? Does work allow you enough time to maintain your social and family commitments as well as free time? Although non-work life stressors can contribute, it is often work commitments, workplace culture and workplace stress that contribute to a skewed work-life balance.

One aspect of being in a caring profession is that we often work odd hours. Our profession is a 24-hour job, and the needs of our patients/clients don't align with standard business hours. Shift work, especially rotating shifts, can disrupt circadian rhythms, resulting in chronic health issues, poor sleep, disrupted social interactions and accidents. In particular, shift work can result in social difficulties and isolation. How many times have you missed a family event or social situation because you had to work outside 'normal' work hours? Burnout from working excessive night duty is known to compromise a nurse's emotional and mental reserves.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in 2020, working from home was encouraged. Some found this helped their own life balance, as it eliminated the work commute, allowed them to have more personal time, and fulfilled family responsibilities. But others find the separation between work and home had become blurred and they were not able to effectively leave work behind. But for nurses, midwives and carers, work is essential. It pays the bills and, on some level, provides us with fulfilment and social interaction. But in this new realm of pandemics, how can we balance the demands and obligations of work with our non-work lives?

Self-awareness and the ability to recognise that your work-life balance is skewed are the keys. What are your ambitions? Are you happy overall? Are you accomplishing most of what you want? We cannot reach inner balance until we become mindful of this equilibrium. If not, what needs to change?

There are many techniques to achieve a suitable work life balance. Recommended tips include:

Leave work at work

When you walk out at the end of a shift, change from 'insert name' the nurse/midwife to 'insert name' the parent, sibling, or spouse. Don't take your nurse persona back home with you.

Say 'NO' when you can.

Carers are givers and self-sacrificers, so we have the habit of saying yes too often – this can be emotionally draining.

Rest and sleep are critical for maintaining balance.

Being well-rested allows us to tolerate stress and avoid burnout. People who get enough sleep often have more positive outlooks, greater mental agility and can put a 'space' between a stressor and their response to it.

Exercise is a terrific way to work off stress and rejuvenate.

Have hobbies and leisure activities, and don't simply flop in front of the TV as the default. You don't have to be a gym junkie, just get out – grab the dog or a friend and go for a walk.

Balance your hours

Research has shown that nearly half of all people who have experienced deterioration in work-life balance believed longer working hours were a contributing factor. If so, is it worth dropping your hours at work to achieve a better work-life balance? Financial considerations often make this change difficult to achieve but it is worth casting a critical eye in this area.

You are what you eat

Our physical and mental health is directly related to our diet. Decrease your intake of fast food, processed foods, and empty calorie fizzy drinks. Eat more complex carbohydrates – they help raise your brain serotonin levels and stabilise your blood glucose levels.

Surround yourself with positive influences

Strive to maintain healthy personal work relationships and avoid toxic people who try to drain your energy.

Make time for you

Prioritise time for yourself, whether that is reading a book, going to the gym, taking a hot bath, or just doing an activity that feeds your spirit. This concept of 'time for you' may seem a fantasy, but it is a key to personal happiness.

The balance between work and personal life is a constant rebalancing act, and the equilibrium is always shifting with the vagaries of life challenges. But eventually, making small but mindful changes makes all the difference to a life well-lived.

Be kind to yourself!

5 ways to re-energise on a night shift

By Natalie Dragon

For many nurses and midwives working night shifts, it can be challenging to keep energy levels up and remain mentally alert. Here are five ways to re-energise and combat night shift fatigue.

Stay hydrated

It's hard to focus when you are dehydrated. Water has energising properties and staying hydrated can help you function optimally while working at night. Have a big water bottle by your side at your work station to sip regularly.

While caffeine can help keep maintain alertness, it is best to monitor your intake and drink in small doses. Try a hot cup of green tea. Avoid caffeine drinks later in the shift which may make it difficult for you to fall asleep when you get home.

Stay active

Staying active is one way to negate the effects of fatigue. Research shows nurses and midwives on night shift experience the most drowsiness about 4am. If you are due a break at this time, re-charge with a short burst of activity by taking a walk within your facility or climbing a couple of flights of stairs. If you're stuck on the ward, something as simple as doing 12-15 repetitions of stretches or exercises such as push-ups, leg lifts or crunches can re-invigorate.

Have healthy snacks

Similarly to dehydration, it is difficult to function if your blood sugar level is low. Eating small snacks throughout the shift will keep your energy levels up.

Pack a variety of fruits, vegetables and high-protein snacks to sustain you. Protein helps supply your body with a steady source of energy. Snack on high quality protein foods such as a small tub of Greek yoghurt. Avoid refined sugar snacks which may provide an instant boost but cause energy levels to plummet later on. Dried fruit or a granola bar will give an energy boost.

Find constructive ways to keep busy

On some wards and units the night shift may be slower-paced than working the day shift. It also has less interaction with other healthcare professionals, facility staff and families. While fewer staff are employed on the night shift, there may be more opportunity to interact with awake patients and provide better patient care. Chatting with your co-workers will also make the time go quicker and may help develop stronger workplace relationships. There may also be opportunities to get any work done that will help colleagues on other shifts.

Be aware of your rights

Be aware of what breaks and conditions you are entitled to in your workplace.

Night shift workers need opportunities to take a brief walk, drink coffee, chat with others and get some fresh air.

These all help to maintain concentration and reduce workplace errors.

[The ANMF Victorian Branch night shift policy](#) outlines management must ensure all nurses and midwives working night shifts have access to similar facilities and amenities as day staff. These include access to food heating and refrigeration equipment; appropriate and secure staff only rest facilities; and environmental working conditions that meet OH&S legislation including security and lighting.

Be aware of self

Finally, monitor your own health. Research shows night shift workers have a higher risk of adverse health outcomes including insomnia, high blood pressure, menstrual irregularities and weight gain. Give some thought to how you can offset these risks and best care for yourself during your night shift roster.

Andrew,
Nurses & Midwives Health member



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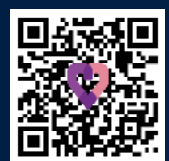
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