

Night Shift Sleep Protocol

Protecting circadian rhythm and sleep quality on a rotating or fixed night schedule

Night shift work misaligns the body's circadian clock with the light-dark cycle it evolved around, and that misalignment is linked to shorter, lower-quality sleep and elevated long-term health risk. This protocol does not undo shift work — it reduces the mismatch using the variables with the most consistent evidence: light exposure, timing, and sleep environment.

1. LIGHT MANAGEMENT

- **Wear wraparound sunglasses on the commute home**
Morning light is the strongest signal telling your circadian clock to wake up — blocking it on the drive or walk home after a night shift prevents your body from re-anchoring to a day schedule.
- **Seek bright light during the first half of your shift**
Bright light (ideally 1,000+ lux) in the first few hours of a night shift helps suppress melatonin and shifts your circadian phase to match your working hours.
- **Blackout your sleep space completely**
Daytime sleep is fought against a rising circadian alerting signal — full blackout curtains or a sleep mask meaningfully improve total sleep time in shift workers.

2. TIMING STRATEGY

- **Keep a consistent sleep schedule, even on days off**
Alternating between a night schedule on work days and a day schedule on off days is the single biggest driver of poor adaptation. Pick one schedule and hold it as consistently as possible.
- **Nap strategically before a night shift**
A 90-minute nap in the afternoon before a night shift reduces sleep pressure and improves alertness and performance during the shift itself.

3. SLEEP ENVIRONMENT

- **Lower the room temperature**

Core body temperature needs to drop to initiate and maintain sleep — daytime rooms run warmer than night, so actively cooling the space (60-67F / 16-19C) compensates.

- **Use white or brown noise to mask daytime sound**

Daytime ambient noise (traffic, household activity) causes more sleep fragmentation than nighttime noise. A consistent masking sound reduces awakenings.

- **Silence phone notifications entirely during sleep hours**

Treat your daytime sleep block with the same boundaries you'd give a nighttime one — notifications and calls should be routed to silent or do-not-disturb.

4. CAFFEINE & MEALS

- **Cut caffeine at least 8 hours before your intended sleep time**

Caffeine has a half-life of roughly 5-6 hours; consuming it in the second half of a night shift routinely delays and fragments the sleep that follows.

- **Eat your main meal earlier in the shift, not right before sleep**

A large meal close to your daytime sleep window raises core temperature and digestive activity right when the body needs both to fall, delaying sleep onset.

5. TRANSITIONING BACK TO A DAY SCHEDULE

- **Shift gradually over 2-3 days when your schedule changes**

Moving sleep and wake times by 1-2 hours per day, rather than all at once, reduces the jet-lag-like symptoms of an abrupt switch back to a daytime schedule.