

Healthy Living Tips for Late Shift Workers

This is the TD Fitness podcast with Coach T, episode number 86.

Welcome to the TD Fitness podcast, giving you ways to live a healthy lifestyle without giving up the things that make life worth living. And now your host, certified health coach and personal trainer, Coach T.

Hey, hey, hey, what's up guys? This is Coach T and this is episode number 86 of the TD Fitness podcast. And in this episode, we're talking healthy living tips for late shift workers. I'll tell you, I'm really excited about this topic because it's based on a question that comes directly from one of you, from one of our Action Takers actually, Heather, who is a nurse and it applies to so many others as well. I work, as you know, in the military, I have a lot of friends who are commercial pilots. So sometimes there's late nights or late flights involved with that. And then in the military, there are a number of jobs where 24 hour coverage is required. So this is an important topic.

We talk a lot about healthy living for busy individuals. Well, sometimes it's not just being busy that we have to worry about. Sometimes it's just the convenience, or I should say, inconvenience of our schedules that prevents us from living our healthiest life. And if you don't work the night shift or if you're not familiar with it, there are some very unique challenges that come along with that, particularly from a health and fitness perspective. So we're going to unpack that a little bit here in this episode, and I'll start with just a quick story, a little bit of my experience.

Actually, when I was in pilot training for the military, I went to Little Rock Air Force Base in Arkansas for some simulator training. I was there as part of a flight training course for my primary aircraft, the C-130. The air force uses simulators a lot as part of their pilot training because you can practice a lot of things in the simulator that you can't practice in the airplane, and they had to produce a lot of pilots. You really couldn't waste a lot of time in training. So the simulators ran for 24 hours at a time in four hour blocks. And because I was one of the lowest ranking, this is very early in my career, so I got like the last time shift if you will, or the worst time for the simulator and the worst time for the box as we call it.

And so I had a 9:00 or 10:00 PM show time. I would show up to brief and do the instruction with my instructor for a couple of hours. And then we would get in the simulator at midnight and we'd fly for two hours and then swap seats with my partner. He would get in the pilot seat, I would get in the co-pilot seat, we'd fly for another two hours and we were done by 4:00 AM. And then we'd debrief or talk about how things went, and usually got out of there around 5:00 AM. So we're essentially working about eight hours or so total from about 9:00 PM to 5:00 AM. And what would I do at 5:00 AM? Well, Waffle House was my go to then.

So after a 5:00 AM land time or getting out of the brief at 5:00 AM, then I would head to the Waffle House, and then I would get breakfast, and then I go home and go to sleep. And I loved it, I'm not going to lie. I was young, breakfast has always been my favorite meal of the day, and it was easy for me to recover and do that again the next day. But I didn't have to maintain this schedule for months on end. Usually, it was only a few days or a couple of weeks at a time, and that's not my schedule now. I'm far from it.

From time to time, I will have to fly early or land extremely late, but that's the exception these days, not the norm. But I realized that there are other jobs and disciplines that do

require those late night shifts and those late long hours, and that requires shift work. Many career fields in the military or in the first responder lanes, they require 24 hour coverage schedules. And like I said, the individual who asked this question, one of our Action Takers, Heather, is a nurse and then she's restarting 12 hour shifts from 7:00 PM to 7:00 AM on three days a week. And she said she was thinking about starting some kind of intermittent fasting routine but wasn't sure how to do that when half of the week she was awake at night, and then the other half she was on more of a regular schedule or not working at all. So basically, she's looking for advice on eating and exercise with a crazy schedule and how to go about that.

As I said, I have several friends who fly as commercial pilots, where although they only work a couple of weeks a month, the hours required can be out of the normal circadian rhythm as it's called, or our normal routine of sleep at night and awake and work during the day. And some of those pilot friends fly exclusively at night though. If you've ever wondered how your packages get to your door on the next day of delivery, well, if it's coming from somewhere else, it's usually being flown overnight by like a FedEx or UPS or something like that. And guess what? Someone's got to work overnight to get it there.

I heard a staggering statistic not long ago about the life expectancy of pilots who retire from these types of jobs. And it was, like I said, a staggering number. I don't remember the exact number, but I remember it being a lot higher than I thought it ever would be, or a lot shorter, I should say, as far as the life expectancy of someone who retires after a career of that type of flying where you're on what's called the backside of the clock, which you can't control. Typically, your eating habits and exercise habits aren't the best. So those things can all catch up with you, but you can control some of that, and that's kind of what I want to talk about, some of those things that you can control. How can we best approach your schedule to be your best self and provide for long term health?

So what most of these nighttime jobs have in common is that, first, there's a lack of healthy eating options in the wee hours at night. Sometimes you're just relegated to what's in the vending machine. Typically, the restaurants aren't open, at least not the healthier ones with healthier options. So you're just kind of stuck with what's there if you don't plan ahead.

Another unique thing about those night shifts is that most of your work time is actually spent working, whereas when we work during the day it's kind of a standard practice and common to take a lunch break, and it's even okay to maybe go exercise during that period of time. It's somewhat acceptable, if you will, to break away and to go get a workout in or to travel to go get a healthy meal. But many times for those night shifts, I mean, you're busy and you have to stay at your post or continue doing what you're doing and you make it a short period to go grab a bite or something like that. But it's just something to think about, one of the differences between working the night shift and the normal day shift.

And then working shifts can can upset your body's internal clock. And your internal clock, I talked about this circadian rhythm, that's essentially what it is. Your internal clock basically tells your body to be awake during the day and to sleep at night, and it's related to your hormones and metabolism. So normal sleep cycles and hormone function is really thrown off a bit because of these nighttime schedules. And those who work nights typically sleep less during the day because it's not natural and it's not usually quiet during the day, it's certainly not dark, and all of those things help us to sleep better, so it's not natural to sleep during the day. So typically, night shift workers get chronically less sleep over the long term.

And then finally, your ability to resist temptations, and this is a real thing. Resisting things like unhealthy foods or sweets and things like that, it's typically at your lowest point later in the day because your ability to control those cravings and to have some self-restraint and

self-control actually wanes during the day, so it becomes harder and harder. So that's something to think about, too.

So how do we address all of these things? We have all of these factors that could work against us when we're working nighttime jobs. We have some statistics that show that it could lead to an unhealthy lifestyle, but certainly there are people who do it, and people who are healthy, and people who live a long time. So how do they do it? What are some of the things that they do and what should we consider if we do have to work these longer hours or later shifts?

So I'm going to just give you a few things that can help with this. And generally speaking though, they are things that are common to healthy living overall. You just have to think about them a little bit differently maybe in order to apply them to late shifts and late nights. And the first one I'll mention is to eat a main meal before going to work, okay?

So if you eat that main meal before going to work, that does a couple of things for you. Number one, you can control what you eat before you're at work. If you don't have the ability to control what you eat at work as much, you can certainly control what you eat before work, and that can be a much healthier option. And typically, if you stick to something with proteins and healthy fibers, those things are going to keep you full longer. So that's one thing. Get a good meal in before you go to work, and that way, you don't feel like you have to stuff yourself after work and then likely go right to sleep afterwards. So eat your main meal for the day or the main meal for that period before going to work.

The second thing you can do while you're at work, and this requires a little bit of planning, but you can pack healthy snacks so you're not just stuck with what's left in the vending machines. We all know that vending machines typically don't have the best options. And like I said, a lot of times, there aren't very good options from like the local cafeteria if they're even open, and things like that. Typically, you don't have the full service menus there. So it'll be important for you to think a little bit ahead and plan how you're going to conduct yourself over your eight or 12 hour shift or however long you work. But you can do that by you determining what you're going to put into your body and not being stuck with what minimal or few options there are. So pack some healthy so that you can munch on during the shift.

Next, don't drink too much caffeine. And this is one that's easy to do because... or it's easy to do incorrectly because we think that we need that caffeine to stay up. And caffeine can certainly help you stay alert, but if you drink more than about two to three small cups of regular coffee, for example, that can stay in your system for up to eight hours and that can affect your sleep once you do lay down and try to get some rest after working. So that's something to consider.

Next, avoid alcohol. Sometimes, I won't call it a nightcap because it would actually be a morning cap or a day cap. When you get off of your long shifts, sometimes you just want to relax and you have some alcohol. Well, if you drink alcohol after working or just before going to bed period, that may help you feel more relaxed, but it does not help with your rest and your sleep. So what you want to do is try to avoid that before falling asleep.

Next, stay active while you work. So certainly, there are some jobs where you have to sit at a desk over the night shift, and those are more difficult. But if you can, try and get up and move around periodically at least every half hour, hour or so. And if you do have a job though that keeps you on your feet while you're working the night shift, then that's great because at least you're staying active and that's what I'm asking you to do.

And then finally, stick to a routine. Try to routinize your schedule. We are creatures of habit, you've heard me say it before. So if you can do some of these things that I mentioned; eating

a main meal before going to work, pack healthy snacks, try to stay away from too much caffeine, avoid alcohol after your work shift, trying to stay active, all those things tend to provide a routine for your life. And if you can get used to doing that, then it's going to be more common, more natural for you, and more comfortable. And that's where you want to be. We want to increase the number of healthy habits in our life and continue to do those kind of without thinking, actually make them habits and get rid of the things that are less healthy for us and try to minimize those. So sticking to a routine is one way to do that.

Remember though, and going back to the question about intermittent fasting, remember that your dietary approach always has to fit your lifestyle. Now, I can see how fasting may be hard for someone working nights. So if you do choose to fast, I would recommend it doing it on your days off, so that you can take advantage of the fasting period during the nights that you do sleep. Typically, I only fast five days a week. The point is that you don't have to do it all the time. And if fasting doesn't work for you, maybe the main meal before work and healthy snacks during your shift, something light before bed and avoiding the alcohol and don't go overboard with the caffeine, those are things that you can do. You don't have to fast, okay? And as I mentioned, try to stay moving. Try not to stay seated the entire time.

When it comes to exercise, I'll tell you that the benefit of the late shift is that it's not a painfully early wake up to exercise before going to work. So I routinely get up at 5:00 AM, which is fairly comfortable for me now, but I understand that not everybody has a desire to get up that early. I can certainly understand that, but I do that so that I can exercise before work, before my day gets away from me, and so that I can spend time with my family after work. But if you work the night shift, then it may be easier for you to actually get your workout in before going into work. So think about starting your day a little bit earlier than your work schedule would dictate. I know this may involve sacrificing a little bit of family time and certainly those priorities are yours to make, but in the long run, understand that exercise on a routine basis or regular basis will help you feel better, it'll make you less stressed and more prepared to tackle your duties at work after getting some exercise and fitness in before your shift.

So for some, exercise after your shift may work well, you may need to unwind. For others, you may have a harder time going to sleep after exercising post shift. But the bottom line is to do what works for you. And that's kind of the biggest takeaway that I can give regarding nutrition and fitness for shift workers, is really to plan for it before you're left to make a decision on the fly. Think about those meal options or the lack of meal options if you will, and prepare or purchase healthy options beforehand. Think about your schedule next week and decide which days you will exercise and when. Sometimes, all we have to do is get out of the next 12 or 24 hours that are in our head right now and think forward just a little bit. That will allow us to open our eyes and plan a little bit. Nothing is a surprise if we plan for it. It may be a difficult or awkward schedule, but it's still a schedule, which means you can plan around it.

So to all my shift workers out there, let me say thanks for what you do. I know it can be difficult, but hopefully some of this advice is helpful and you can find it useful. You ultimately have the power to control your actions and how you approach your schedule. So just make smart, healthy decisions, one at a time. You don't have to be perfect. Just try to be better, okay? Not perfect.

So speaking of better and not perfect, I want to let you all know that I'm opening up enrollment for my Action Taker monthly member program later this month. So be on the lookout for that. Openings only occur by the way every four months, and my Action Takers that are in the program right now, the monthly members, they are absolutely crushing it. They are taking steps each and every day towards a healthier life, and there are steps that are personalized to them in their specific situation. So you can learn more about that at

tdfitness.net/monthlymember. I will be putting more information on that in the very near future. And you can get the show notes for this episode at tdfitness.net/086.

That's all I have for you, guys. So I just want you to know that I so appreciate you guys. Thank you so much for tuning in. I want you to have a blessed one. This is Coach T, signing out.