

DoD Ergonomics Working Group NEWS



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How Does Overtime Impact Workers?

When management is faced with personnel shortages or the need to meet peak production demands and schedules, overtime is often the solution. But is it a wise decision?

Although management may view overtime as a temporary solution, it often becomes a standard way of managing work demands. In many instances, the extended overtime hours approach the same hours worked in a 12-hour shift system; however, the use of overtime is applied with little consideration to its consequences.

The health effects of extended work hours are well documented and include:

- Increased risk for cardiovascular disease
- Sleep disorders
- Depression
- Ulcers
- Gastrointestinal dysfunction and disorders
- Breast cancer
- Complications of existing medical conditions such as diabetes and epilepsy

In addition to these health effects, working overtime:

- Reduces the amount of quality time to spend with family members and meet family care demands, leading to increased levels of stress, irritability, and feelings of isolation.
- Increases the risk of substance abuse as workers resort to caffeine, stimulants, and tobacco to stay awake and alcohol and depressant drugs to fall asleep.
- Increases worker concern about their health and longevity.
- Increases absences for sickness and accidents.

Productivity and performance costs are often not apparent to management—but the truth is these costs can far exceed the direct costs of overtime. Just using the example of worker fatigue caused by extended hours—and resulting increased errors and accidents, decreased concentration, slower reaction time, failure to perceive and react to critical signals, impaired motor skills and coordination, decreased ability to handle stress, reduced problem-solving and decision-making abilities, and increased risk-taking behavior—reveals overtime is often not a smart solution.

Finally, and perhaps the strongest argument against extended work hours, **productivity levels and work output do not increase in proportion to the hours worked.** In fact, extending the workday often causes the tempo of work to slow down and the hourly output to decrease, especially in physically demanding jobs.

Worker fatigue from overtime hours is very costly in terms of worker health, performance, and morale.

Dramatic examples of fatigue-related accidents include the chemical spill in Bhopal, India; the nuclear accidents at Three-Mile Island and Chernobyl; and the Exxon Valdez oil spill.