TIPS FOR MAKING SHIFT WORK WORK FOR YOU:

These tips should help diminish the adverse side effects felt when adjusting to a non-traditional schedule; however, if symptoms are severe or do not recede, consulting with a sleep specialist could help rule out a more serious, underlying health condition.

If you choose to work the night shift, remember to focus on a healthy lifestyle and take care of yourself first. With good sleep habits, your night-shift work can be productive and rewarding.

• Accept that your daytime routines will be different. Don’t try to lead a “normal” life during the day and then work a night shift as well.

• Be careful about volunteering for overtime, double shifts, or short callbacks.

• Determine what hours (7-8 hours) you are going to sleep. These must be the same hours every day through the work week.

• Sleep as soon as possible after the night shift. If you delay sleep after the night shift, your body will begin to warm up and prepare for the day’s activity.

• Ideally, have one block of sleep only; if this is not possible, two blocks of sleep are preferable to a scattered sleep pattern.

• Try not to use sleeping pills; avoid alcohol prior to sleep, it is a diuretic and interferes with the quality of sleep; avoid caffeine three to four hours prior to sleep, caffeine intake delays sleep onset and impairs sleep quality, and finally, avoid nicotine before going to bed.

• On days off, overlap half of your usual work period with sleep. This prevents a shock to your body rhythm when you return to work. For example, if your usual shift is 11 p.m. to 7 a.m., stay awake until 3 a.m., then sleep a full 8 hours.

• If you’re working the night shift temporarily, try sleeping for two 4-hour periods just before and after your shift.

• Tell your family and friends what your sleep hours are and tell them not to call or wake you during this period unless it’s a life or death emergency.

• Night workers will sleep better during the day if they can simulate night-time sleeping conditions.

• Make your bedroom as dark as possible. Many stores carry curtain liners specifically for this purpose. Very heavy black paper on the windows also works. Or wear an eye mask. This is vital, as melatonin, the hormone of sleep which increases drowsiness, is suppressed by daylight even through closed eyelids.

• Sleep in a quiet part of the house, away from traffic noise and household activity.

• Control noise. Shut off the phone in the bedroom. Use a fan or sound machine to drown out noise coming from outside. DO NOT turn on a TV or radio. You might think that you sleep better with those on but it keeps you from getting into the deepest sleep possible.

• Feel safe and comfortable. Lock doors and windows for a feeling of security.

• Create a bedtime routine...this signals the body that you are preparing to sleep and you begin relaxing. A short warm shower and a few minutes of reading (something dull for 10 minutes) in bed usually will do the trick. Ten minutes of meditating also works well.
• Eat a banana or drink some warm milk before going to bed. Both these foods contain L-Tryptophan, which is known to be a natural sleep inducer. L-Tryptophan releases serotonin, a sleep-inducing brain chemical.

• If you cannot sleep, stay in bed and rest. Avoid negative thoughts and assure yourself that you are at least getting needed rest.

• Working shifts often requires eating at night. At this time, the stomach and the digestive processes slow down and stop, and cannot digest food like meat and eggs. Diet issues include having mealtimes at irregular hours and eating to compensate for feelings of fatigue. Many third shift workers report diarrhea or constipation, gastric and peptic ulcers, gastritis, nausea and weight gain due to disrupted eating habits, as well as the consumption of more than usual amounts of caffeinated beverages.

• Weight gain can occur, as people eat regular daytime meals and continue to snack or graze throughout the night. If possible, take meals at approximately the same time each day, either midday or early evening irrespective of whether you are on night shift.

• To keep your weight under control while working the night shift:
  o Bring nutritious snacks to work and avoid junk food
  o Drink lots of water or natural fruit juices and avoid beverages containing caffeine. Dehydration is a common problem for nightshift workers.

• Appointments: Yes, the dentist, doctor and most everyone else thinks that since you work nights, you’ve got the whole day to set up appointments. NOT. Protect your sleep schedule! If you choose to sleep second shift (approx. 1pm to 9pm) you can schedule all your appointments in the morning hours. If you sleep first shift hours (approx. 8am to 4pm), you need to schedule appointments for late afternoon or evening. Look around...there’s a good chance that you will find the services you need in the less traditional hours. If there simply isn’t any way to make appointments for late afternoon, then opt for first appointment of the morning and then get home to bed immediately after.

• Be especially careful when driving home. Drowsiness at this time can result in traffic tickets or accidents. When driving home in the morning wear dark sunglasses to prevent exposure to bright light. Bright light affects the circadian rhythm and will make it more difficult to fall asleep when you get home.

• Staying awake and alert on the job can be very challenging. Short breaks can help maintain alertness. Conversation and activity help prevent sleepiness. Exercise such as walking can also help. Eat regular meals and avoid fatty foods that often result in sluggish feelings. Caffeine should be used sparingly and only in the early part of the shift. Avoid keeping the most boring work for last when you are the most exhausted. The low point of the night is around 4 am so this is a good time to plan for a break. Keeping bright lights on (as they do in hospitals) also helps prevent sleepiness and increases alertness.

• It is especially important to be alert to the signs of sleepiness. When you experience the familiar signs of yawning, eyes closing and head bobbing, plus the subjective experience of drowsiness, it indicates that you need to take a break, move around, and increase your level of stimulation.