



Breaks

WHY ARE BREAKS IMPORTANT?

Breaks allow workers to recover from the mental and physical demands of their positions. Breaks outside of the work day allow for sleep, facilitate rest and recovery, improve morale, and ensure safe, efficient operations. Breaks within the work day reduce task-related fatigue, risk of accidents, and improve productivity.

HOW LONG SHOULD BREAKS BE?

'Overnight' breaks between work days should be long enough to allow workers to obtain a recommended amount of sleep, in addition to time for travel, eating, showering, and social and family responsibilities. Overnight breaks of at least 11 hours are preferable to allow for an 8-hour sleep opportunity.

Extended breaks between blocks of work are designed to allow personnel to recover from accumulated sleep loss and the physical and mental demands of work. See Section 2, Extended Hours, for further guidance on scheduling extended working hours and the appropriate amount of breaks associated with them.

Breaks within work days: in addition to statutory breaks (e.g., meal breaks) regular short breaks (e.g., 5-10 minutes every hour) have been shown to improve alertness and productivity. Breaks allow 'time-on-task' related fatigue to dissipate. Where tasks are 'self-paced', workers benefit from being able to schedule their own breaks, as they can be matched to times when they are most needed. Where pacing of the task is external (e.g., machine-paced), breaks must be scheduled, which may mean that they do not match the time of highest need. Such mismatch may mean that the maximum benefit is not gained from the break – either it occurs too late, after performance decrements have already begun, or too

early and so disrupt the workflow without any real performance benefit. For example, a study showed that drivers most effectively managed their fatigue when they were able to choose the timing of their rest breaks to match the time they were feeling fatigued. When judging the need for a break, particularly if working at night, or after an extended period awake, workers should be aware that cognitive impairment may be present alongside physical symptoms such as yawning or 'fidgeting', and not wait until the point they are struggling to keep awake before taking a break.

The specific duration of breaks and division of work periods depends very much on the task; for example, very cognitively (e.g., active monitoring) or physically demanding (e.g., rig maintenance) tasks will require more frequent recovery breaks than less demanding tasks. Generally, more frequent short breaks have been shown to be more beneficial in terms of fatigue, productivity, and vigilance than longer breaks of the same total duration. For example, when industrial workers took 10 minute breaks every hour, they were shown to be more productive and less fatigued than those taking 15 minute breaks every 90 minutes; conversely, for those working at computers, frequent short breaks (e.g., 5 minutes every hour, plus a 30 minute lunch break) reduce discomfort and eye strain and do not impact productivity.

While little research has been done in the oil industry, based on the scientific data as described above, the ideal structure for breaks is likely somewhere between scheduled and self-paced. Breaks should be required after a specified work duration, with an agreed total of time to be spent on breaks during the shift, but the worker has some freedom to choose the exact timing of breaks, and how often to take them, based on how demanding the task is. For example, a total of 2 hours of breaks during an 8 hour shift (this example is for 8 hour shifts, as this is where most of the research has been

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undertaken), could be divided in multiple different ways depending on the task:

- High vigilance, low activity (i.e., seated) task, for example computer-based or monitoring: a 5 minute break per hour plus a 30 minute lunch break
- Repetitive 'Industrial task' with elevated injury risk: a 15 minute break after every 2 hours of continuous work
- High vigilance tasks with prolonged standing: 45 minutes standing, high vigilance task, alternating with a 15 minute break or seated administrative duty

WHAT SHOULD I DO DURING MY BREAK?

For short breaks (less than 30 minutes), leave the work environment, and have something healthy to eat and/or drink. If you undertake non-physical tasks, stretching or light exercise can benefit you – 10 minutes of flexibility and strength exercises can improve flexibility, alertness, and mood.

On longer breaks (ideally 30 minutes or more), the beneficial effects are significantly increased by taking a nap – if this is permitted by your role and company. See Section 5 of this document, Napping, for additional information on how to maximise the effectiveness of naps.

During extended breaks at home, be mindful of your activities prior to returning to work. Having a second job or undertaking strenuous tasks (e.g., home remodelling, or running a marathon just before returning to work) may impact on your ability to recover, and cope with the following block of work.

WHAT CAN THE COMPANY DO?

Provide sufficient breaks:

- Through the Company Fatigue Management Plan, ensure that adequate breaks for the nature of work are determined and provided
- During work days – to reduce risk of accident and injury, and performance decrements related to reduced alertness and/or time on task

- Between work days – to ensure that workers have sufficient time to obtain adequate sleep for recovery
- Between blocks of work – to recover from the demands of work, and any accumulated sleep loss, as well as maintain a work-life balance

Provide facilities for breaks at work

- Provide break rooms in which workers can prepare/access food and drink, sit down, get out of the heat/cold/noise, with space for light stretching/exercise for sedentary workers, and adequate lighting for reading – which also helps with alertness
- Provide napping facilities (if approved by Business): a dark, quiet, comfortable room with lie-flat surfaces for workers to use during longer breaks

Provide education on performance decrements, and napping

- To prevent workers leaving it 'too late' before taking self-paced breaks, educate on the early signs of performance decrements - for example, difficulty in concentrating, problem solving or performing simple calculations, as well as increasing irritability and difficulty in communication and controlling emotions
- Education on napping, sleep inertia, and the importance of recovery from the nap before returning to work
- Educate of the importance of breaks, the benefits of taking them away from the work task, and the impact on productivity and safety

Manage the risk of more frequent starting and stopping work

- While increasing the number of breaks can reduce fatigue-related performance decrements and errors, starting and stopping work for these breaks is also associated with increased distraction, and therefore errors. The company should guard against distraction during these 'start-up' and 'shut-downs' for breaks by having a set procedure to reduce their impact and the likelihood of errors. This procedure could include, for example, a checklist that must be followed, or requirements for a briefing, to ensure situational awareness is maintained.

Key references

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