

# How to beat night shift dread

It's not unusual to feel anxious before starting a run of nights but there are ways to tackle this, doctors tell **Abi Rimmer**



### Get a structured handover

**Arafat Mulla, specialty trainee year 4 in respiratory medicine, North West deanery**

“Be in control and get to work early. Nothing is worse than running late for handover and having your heart racing before anything has even happened.

“Actually, there is something worse: not having a handover. The best night shifts I’ve done have always had a structured, friendly, and relevant handover. If your hospital doesn’t do this, it’s the first thing you should be working on.

“Once you know what needs to be done, have a discussion about how to prioritise tasks. If you’re not sure, talk to your team. Sometimes it isn’t possible to do everything. Make sure the important things are done overnight and know what you can leave for the day team.

“Be friendly. Make friends with the people you work with. Have a sit down together at 2 am to chat about how the night is going and ask each other for advice. Include nurses and other specialties too—you can support and learn from each other.

“Once the shift is over, get breakfast together. Remember, even the most junior member of the team can call the most senior and invite them for a cup of tea and a chat. When everyone is comfortable with each other it’s easier to discuss the little things that might be worrying you. These, by the way, are never ‘little’ and are usually crucial for patient safety. Don’t let there be barriers to talking to each other.”



### Get to know your team

**Mary Randles, specialty trainee in geriatric and internal medicine, Cork, Ireland**

“Firstly, don’t underestimate the importance of food. It will make or break your week of nights. Plan delicious meals and snacks that you will look forward to. This will help you to pace your nights and avoid relying on vending machine snacks that will send you on a sugar rollercoaster. It will also stop you worrying about missing the canteen’s brief opening hours.

“Be wary of too much coffee—it could send you jumping sky high every time the bleep goes off and create further difficulty when you try to sleep the next day.

“Clear your schedule for the week if you can and try to leave your night shift week for work and rest. This is not the time for reorganising your wardrobe or painting the kitchen.

“Bring a notebook to write down jobs and reminders. Don’t be afraid to look up correct drug doses and algorithms. No one will judge you for having to look up the loading dose of phenytoin infusion at 4 am.

“In the days before covid-19 I would have strongly recommended booking a massage or a spa day for the day you finished nights. However, the sentiment still stands—having something to look forward to at the end of the week helps it fly by. At the moment, a nice walk or bath will have to suffice.

“Finally, never call a senior doctor or a doctor in another specialty and say, ‘Sorry for bothering you.’ Try saying, ‘Thanks for taking my call.’ An old tip but a goodie.”



### Let yourself relax the day before

**Victoria Kinkaid, military junior doctor, Frimley Park Hospital**

“As someone who really dislikes night shifts I am here to talk you through them, starting from the day before to the days after your shifts. The night before your first shift try to stay up later to start switching your body clock into night shift mode. Hopefully this will make you sleep in the morning of your shift, to start changing your body clock.

“Relax the day of your night shift—don’t put yourself under pressure to sleep but do take it easy. Have a lie in, take a nice bath, read a book, and have a big lunch and dinner.

“If you want to drink coffee during the night, do so at the start of your shift, but switch to decaf towards the end so that you can sleep when you get home.

“When you get home, as much as you want to just fall into bed, make yourself a big breakfast. This will stop you waking up earlier because of a grumbling tummy.

“At the end of your nightshift stint, come home and relax that day but try not to sleep. If you do sleep, have a nap after your shift but try to get yourself up around midday and do small tasks for a sense of achievement.

“If, like me, you suffer from post-night shift bloating, try things like mint tea or hot water bottles, and just take it easy.

“Have an early night, to attempt to get your body clock back into the right time zone. And there you have it—easy, right?”

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