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Time Changes and Their Impact on Worker Fatigue and Safety

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On November 2nd, our clocks will once again “fall back” an hour as daylight saving time ends. Most of us dread the thought of another time change, and the disruption to our body’s circadian rhythm. Disruptions to this rhythm—whether from poor sleep habits or shift work—can lead to various health problems, including metabolic issues, depression, and sleep disorders. An unbalanced rhythm can cause fatigue and other serious health problems if we are not prepared and do not allow our bodies time to adjust.

What is a Circadian Rhythm

A circadian rhythm is the body’s natural 24-hour clock that regulates healthy sleep-wake cycles. It is primarily influenced by environmental cues—especially light and darkness—which help synchronize the body's functions with the day-night cycle. Practicing good "circadian health" can improve overall well-being. Some strategies to prepare include:

- **Maintain a consistent schedule:** Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day, including weekends.
- **Get daytime light exposure:** Expose yourself to natural sunlight for at least 30 minutes in the morning. This reinforces your body's wake signal.
- **Limit artificial lights at night:** Dim the lights in the evening and avoid electronic screens for one to two hours before bed.
- **Eat at regular times:** Try to have meals around the same time each day to align your body’s peripheral clocks.
- **Time your exercise:** Regular physical activity can support a healthy rhythm but avoid vigorous exercise too close to bedtime.
- **Manage stimulants:** Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine, especially later in the day.

Worker fatigue and decreased alertness resulting from insufficient or poor-quality sleep can lead to several safety-related consequences. These include slower reaction times, reduced vigilance, reduced decision-making ability, poor judgment, becoming easily distracted during complex tasks, and a loss of awareness in critical situations. When workers’ fatigue due to a lack of sleep crosses the line from slightly slowing their productivity to seriously impairing their judgment or physical control, it poses a serious risk to the workers and those around them.

We need to stop underestimating the impact of time changes. The responsibility for adapting to these transitions lies with each of us—to be prepared and ready when they occur. Poor sleep habits and neglecting the body’s need for a well-regulated circadian rhythm increase fatigue and put both our health and safety at risk.