Fatigue is more than tiredness. It is a state of physical and/or mental exhaustion which reduces a person’s ability to perform work safely and effectively. Fatigue can lead to errors and in turn an increase in workplace incidents and injuries. Construction work can be physically demanding which can increase fatigue.

So what causes fatigue?

- Lack of sleep
  - You could begin this toolbox talk by asking your team to talk about their sleep habits. Questions you could ask or discuss:
    - Raise your hands if you get 7 or more hours of sleep every night?
    - Ask for a show of hands of people who get less than 6 hours a night?
    - Ask those who get the least amount of sleep to talk about their sleep habits and what they’re doing right before they go to bed. Are they on the computer, on their phones in bed?
  - Lack of sleep can be a contributor to fatigue. On average people generally need between 7.5 and 9 hours of sleep a night. The best sleep is deep, undisturbed and taken in a single continuous period. Some tips to help you and your teams promote better sleep:
    - Keep a regular schedule by going to sleep and waking up at similar times each day
    - Sleeping in a dark room
    - Avoid using electronic devices like phones or computers before sleeping
    - Eliminate noise where possible
    - Avoid eating large meals directly before sleep.

- Exercise regularly
  - Maybe you could introduce a team competition to get everyone involved in exercise or sport?

This toolbox talk is intended to help start a health and safety conversation and raise awareness about fatigue. It is not designed as a complete risk management tool for the activity.
Eating & drinking the right stuff

It’s very easy to tell people what they need to eat to stay healthy and fit, but harder to get people to listen and put it into action. Questions you could ask or discuss:

• Who manages to eat three balanced meals a day?
• When was the last time you ate at least one piece of fruit or a vegetable? The Ministry of Health recommends eating at least three vegetables and two pieces of fruit a day.

• Do you drink water regularly throughout the day? Health authorities also recommend drinking at least two litres of water a day. In summer and hot conditions this may need to increase.

You could consider starting a competition on your site to get people to record the amount of fruit and vegetables they’re eating. The one who has the healthiest diet at the end of each week wins a prize. Remind your teams that stimulants such as nicotine and coffee only provide short-term relief from the effects of fatigue. When they wear off there’s often a ‘crash’ which can result in poor quality sleep.

Work schedules

Employers need to make sure their teams are taking regular, quality rest breaks each day. Under law employers must allow a minimum of two paid 10-minute rest breaks and one unpaid 30-minute meal break if someone is working six to eight hours long.

Avoiding long hours:

Try to make sure working hours are not too long. You could consider staggered start and finish times and longer rest breaks. Employers should also monitor and place limits around the amount of overtime worked.

The hot & cold – working outside

Working in construction can be physically demanding. Workers are often outside and can work in extreme temperatures. This can increase fatigue.

Remind your teams that they should take proper rest breaks and make sure there are adequate facilities to do this – protecting them from the heat and sun in summer and the cold in winter.

Fatigue management plan

Make sure there’s a fatigue management plan in place for all workers, managers and supervisors. Some things that should be included:

• Maximum shift length
• Average weekly hours
• Work-related travel
• Procedures for reporting fatigue risks
• Procedures for managing fatigued workers

Where do we get more information?

The Safety Charter’s Impairment Fatigue webpage has more information which is regularly updated. You can view it here or by clicking on Improve Health & Safety – Impairment – Fatigue from the homepage.

Employee issues raised:

Date to be resolved by:

Thank you to WorkSafe New Zealand, the Canterbury Safety Forum and Safe Work Australia for providing information for this toolbox talk.