

# Guidance on Managing Fatigue with Farm Work

HSA

An tÚdarás Sláinte agus Sábháilteachta  
Health and Safety Authority

Does fatigue matter for  
health and safety?



Talking  
about fatigue  
**matters**



Sleeping well  
**matters**



Time of day  
**matters**



Getting help  
with workload  
**matters**



Looking  
after others  
**matters**



The aim of this guidance is to help you **make informed choices** in the management of farm work and fatigue to reduce safety and health risks.

It is designed for farmers, contractors, farm relief workers, partners of farmers, family members and the farm advisory service.

## What is fatigue?

Fatigue is more than feeling tired. It is a decline in mental and/or physical performance generally due to insufficient sleep. This reduces your ability to carry out your farm work safely and effectively.

It can be caused by sleep loss, extended wakefulness, high workload or disruption of your internal body clock. Your internal body clock acts like your own built-in schedule that helps your body know when it's time to sleep and time to wake up. When this gets disrupted because of night work or poor sleep, it can significantly impact you.

### Signs of Fatigue include:

- Losing focus and forgetting things
- Lacking energy and motivation
- Increased risk taking
- Slower reactions
- Feeling irritable
- Tiredness even after sleep

Noticing the signs and symptoms of fatigue in yourself is an important first step to enable you to do something about it. You may notice fatigue because you make more mistakes, make poor judgements and take greater risks. Performance impairment caused by fatigue can be compared to performance impairment due to alcohol intoxication.



# Sleeping well matters for being well

We now know more about the importance of sleep for health. Time spent asleep is not ‘wasted’; while asleep we are repairing our body and mind.

Sleep is essential to the maintenance of health and prevention of disease. It is vital for:

- **Thinking clearly and responding quickly**, organising our thoughts and making sense of new information, all important for problem solving.
- **Our physical health** including our heart health and immune system function. It has a role in the body’s ability to remove toxins reducing the risk of neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s.
- **Our emotional health** enhancing decision making, resilience and emotional wellbeing.

Growing evidence shows that short sleep duration and poor sleep quality, can, in the long term, lead to a range of poor health outcomes, such as increased risk of heart diseases, cancers, mental health conditions, neurodegenerative diseases such as dementia, and obesity, type 2 diabetes and chronic pain conditions.

One recent study showed that short sleep duration (less than 6 hours) in midlife is associated with a 30% increased risk of late-onset dementia<sup>1</sup>. In another study, people sleeping less than 6 hours a night had a 20% higher chance of a heart attack<sup>2</sup>.

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# Ask yourself:



1

## How alert am I?

An alert mind will see risks and help you to react quickly, for example, to recognise signs of livestock aggression and to isolate the animal in time or make better decisions when operating machinery.

Try to notice your fatigue and take action:

- Talk with your partner/peers/farm advisor. It might be impacting you in ways you are unaware of, and/or affecting others around you. Talking about your energy levels should not be a taboo. It's beneficial to gain insight into your own energy peaks and troughs.
- If you are working alone on a challenging task, keep others updated on your location, the task you're doing, how you are doing and when you will be back.
- Take frequent breaks to manage fatigue (5 to 15 mins every 1 to 2 hours). This can improve productivity and reduce the risk of errors and injuries, especially when farm work is demanding or monotonous.
- Consider getting a health check. Seeking medical advice on new physical complaints (for example, ongoing or increasing fatigue, shortness of breath) and the impact of medication on known health conditions is important for your sleep, alertness and safety.

2

## Am I getting good sleep?

Getting a good night's sleep during calving season or other busy times can be particularly difficult for farmers. Sleep is important for all ages. Most adults need between 7 and 9 hours of sleep per night. Problems with sleep can be helped by:

- Investing in technology? For example, the use of calving cameras may aid sleep.
- Time out for napping: short periods of sleep of around 20 minutes have been advocated by some, as a way of coping with fatigue, especially during long working days. But be mindful of impaired alertness (for up to 15 minutes) upon waking up by giving yourself some time before you re-engage in safety critical work.
- Discussing your sleep with your partner/children/peers/doctor/farm advisor and actions you can take to improve it.
- Recording sleep patterns and problems using a diary/smartwatch/App can give you insight into your own fatigue and inform changes you could make (for example, go to bed an hour earlier).
- Improving sleep quality may be helped by better sleep habits or being diagnosed and treated for any sleep disorder you may have.
- A healthy diet, increased levels of physical activity, stress management and restricted alcohol intake are all important parts of a lifestyle that support better sleep and reduced fatigue. What change could you start making to support better sleep?

### HEALTHY SLEEP HABITS



Switch off devices  
1 hour prior



Sleep in a cool,  
dark room



Go to sleep and  
wake at same time



Create a  
bedtime routine



Limit alcohol  
and caffeine

### 3

## What time is it versus risk?

The relative risk of accidents is highest at night between 2am and 6am, the period of maximum sleepiness, or towards the end of a long working day. This is when your alertness and performance is lowest, and you are more likely to make mistakes. A 2022 analysis of farm fatalities (in Northern Ireland) showed that fatality rates in farming increase throughout the working week peaking on Fridays and on Saturdays. Consider the following:

- Change the time of day or the day you complete demanding tasks to ensure you are more alert.
- Allow yourself sufficient time to complete tasks safely. It may not be your preference to 'take your time' but choosing to purposefully work slower on a task because you are aware you are fatigued can prove to be a safer temporary measure.
- Adjust your working hours? Discussions with your partner/peers/vet/farm advisor can help identify positive changes you can make.

### 4

## Can I get help with workload?

Investing in farm labour can be an investment in your own health and safety. Resisting the support farm labour can bring, because of cost or financial pressures, may be a false economy. Upfront cost may increase but this is an insurance against the financial impacts of incidents, serious injuries and fatalities. Think ahead:

- Plan for times of peak workload, for example, hiring labour to take on the morning or evening milking or extra help for the calving season. This can reduce your risk of fatigued related errors at a time when you are more vulnerable to these.
- Consider steps to overcome any challenges in getting farm labour, for example, good forward planning or by ensuring good rostering, good hourly rate and working conditions for farm workers.



### 5

## How do I look after others on my farm?

Consider the working hours and demands placed on others working on your farm. Prioritising output over worker safety has been shown, on numerous occasions, to lead to injury and death.

Ensure good communication between you and other farm workers about:

- health and safety being a priority,
- adopting working hours to ensure the health and safety of all persons on the farm,
- the importance of recognising signs of fatigue,
- the risk of fatigue-related problems being higher towards the end of the working day and during work at night,
- the importance of getting enough sleep and taking breaks, particularly if feeling fatigued, and
- the importance of stopping work completely given fatigue related concerns.

Provide good welfare facilities for farm workers. Such facilities can also be used by workers as a change of environment during monotonous tasks and act as a place to facilitate good communication about health and safety.

## Long term benefits for you and your business

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Taking action to manage fatigue, acknowledging that sleep is important for performance for all ages and addressing these needs, can bring numerous benefits for you, your family and your farm:

- 1** Improved life-long health and wellbeing for you and your farm workers.
- 2** Reduced risk from fatigue related errors and the financial impacts of injury, ill health, and fatalities.
- 3** Improved health and productivity of livestock.
- 4** A positive health and safety culture on your farm fostering trust and commitment between you and others working on your farm.
- 5** Assurance of compliance with health and safety regulations.



## References and Resources

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