Fatigue Management — study guide

Fatigue is a silent hazard: it slows reactions, clouds judgement and has contributed to some of the worst maritime disasters. This guide covers the causes, the warning signs, the legal limits and the controls.[1][2]

What fatigue is

Fatigue is commonly accepted to be a state of mental or physical exhaustion that can significantly impact your ability to work safely, communicate clearly and react effectively in an emergency situation. If fatigue is not carefully managed, it can have disastrous consequences.

Causes

Common causes of fatigue include overwork, anxiety and poor health. Non-work factors can also increase the risk, and stress in particular can affect sleep and recovery.

Warning signs

Common behavioural effects and symptoms include lack of motivation and energy, slowed response times, poor mobility, irritability, impatience and mood changes, fidgeting, head nodding, poor hand-eye co-ordination and yawning.

Identifying fatigue in others

Methods that help identify personnel who may be suffering from fatigue include direct observation of a person's behaviour, investigation findings following a workplace accident or incident, and completion of a fatigue risk assessment.

Legal limits

Seafarers **cannot** work for more than **14 hours** without taking rest — a hard limit on hours of work that exists precisely because of the accident risk.

Real consequences

Fatigue was found to be a significant contributing factor to major incidents such as the **Exxon Valdez** oil spill.

Managing the risk

A "safe and suitable" risk assessment is designed to identify suitable control methods, identify the specific aspects of an operation that pose a particular fatigue risk, and quantify the severity of the risk. Practical controls include: providing information and training about how non-work-related factors increase fatigue risk; allowing opportunities to clarify stress-related issues; ensuring extended watch hours do not result in excessive hours worked (limiting on-call work and providing additional rest

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after a call-out); and redesigning jobs to eliminate boring, repetitive, monotonous tasks.

Key facts to remember

- Fatigue = mental/physical exhaustion impairing safe work, clear communication and emergency reaction.
- Causes: overwork, anxiety, poor health; stress and non-work factors also raise risk.
- Signs: low motivation, slowed responses, poor mobility, irritability, fidgeting, head nodding, poor co-ordination, yawning.
- Identify by observation, incident investigation and a fatigue risk assessment.
- Hard limit: no more than 14 hours' work without rest.
- Exxon Valdez: fatigue a significant contributing factor.
- Controls: training, stress management, capping hours/call-outs, removing repetitive monotony.

Sources

1. STCW Convention and Code — fitness for duty and watchkeeping hours (Section A-VIII/1).
2. Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (as amended) — hours of work and rest (minimum rest, maximum hours).