



FIRE & EMS BULLETIN



FATIGUE IN EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES BEST PRACTICES

Fatigue in Emergency Medical Services (EMS) can be a significant problem for many agencies. EMS professionals often work long hours, irregular shifts, back-to-back per-diem shifts at multiple agencies, and are exposed to highly stressful situations, which can lead to physical and mental exhaustion. Fatigue in EMS can have serious consequences, including:

1. **Impaired Decision-Making:** Fatigue can reduce cognitive function, making it harder for EMS personnel to make quick and accurate decisions during emergencies.
2. **Decreased Performance:** Physical exhaustion can impair the ability to perform critical tasks, such as lifting patients or operating equipment safely.
3. **Increased Risk of Errors:** Fatigue increases the likelihood of mistakes, which can jeopardize patient care and safety.
4. **Health Risks:** Chronic fatigue can lead to long-term health issues, including cardiovascular problems, sleep disorders, and mental health challenges like anxiety and depression.
5. **Safety Concerns:** Fatigue can increase the risk of accidents, such as vehicle crashes during ambulance transport, putting both EMS personnel and patients at risk.
6. **Burnout:** Prolonged fatigue can contribute to burnout, leading to reduced job satisfaction, absenteeism, and higher turnover rates within the EMS workforce.

Addressing Fatigue in EMS

Organizations can take steps to mitigate fatigue among emergency medical providers, such as:

- **Implementing Shift Management Policies:** Limit consecutive hours worked to 24 hours and ensure adequate rest periods between shifts.
- **Promoting Sleep Hygiene:** Educating staff on the importance of quality sleep and providing resources to improve sleep habits. This may include opportunities to nap while on duty. [Short naps](#) (20-30 minutes) can improve alertness, memory, reaction time, and mood. But napping is not a substitute for regular, quality sleep.
- **Providing Mental Health Support:** Offering counseling services and stress management programs to help EMS personnel cope with the demands of their job.
- **Encouraging Physical Fitness:** Promoting regular exercise and healthy eating habits to improve overall resilience and energy levels.
- **Monitoring Workload:** Ensuring that staffing levels are adequate to prevent overwork and excessive overtime.
- **Making Caffeine Available:** Studies have shown that the use of caffeine, such as in caffeinated beverages, can help emergency medical providers in the short term.

The [National Association of State EMS Officials](#), the [National Association of Emergency Medical Technicians](#), and the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) have resources and information for agencies looking for additional evidence-based guidance.