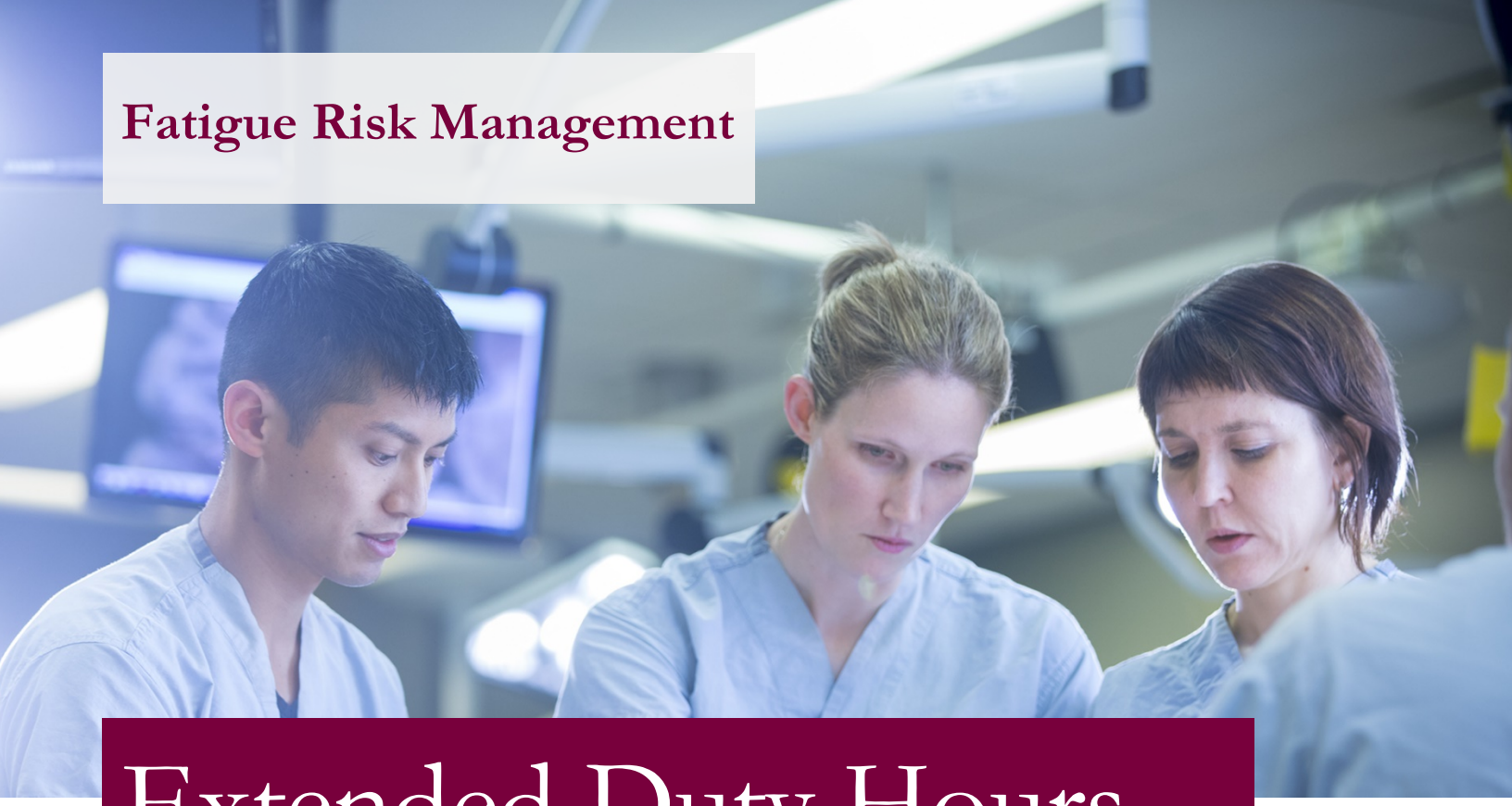

Extended Duty Hours

It's no secret that long hours, varying shifts, being on call or catching up on work in the evenings can lead to fatigue as you're less likely to be getting adequate sleep!

We typically function best on 8 hours of good sleep, followed by being awake for no more than 16 hours – but in the field of medicine, we know this isn't always the typical routine we face. Studies show that being awake for more than 19 hours will decrease our reaction time by around 30%. Being awake for more than 24 hours is like having a blood alcohol concentration of 0.05-0.10%. This reduction can negatively impact our health and the health and safety of our colleagues and patients. The longer we are awake, the greater risk we are at due to fatigue and reduced reaction times. While we can't train ourselves to do more with less sleep, we can take steps to combat longer hours and associated fatigue.

How can I combat fatigue when working extended hours?

It's extremely important to maintain a consistent sleep schedule as much as possible – this means aiming for 7-9 hours of sleep whenever you aren't on call. This will help you combat fatigue and reduce the effects of fatigue. On days you're working long

hours, try to have one or more naps to help you achieve the 7-9 hours of rest that day.

Being aware of the signs of fatigue can help you prevent any adverse events – this includes warning signs such as inability to maintain focus, trouble concentrating on tasks, feeling drowsy, nodding off or yawning. If you encounter any of these warning signs, it's a sure sign your body is telling you that you need a break!

If you're able to, plan breaks throughout your call shift or long workday. During your break, try to expose yourself to natural light or a brightly lit area if it's nighttime, have a snack and some water to keep yourself nourished and hydrated.

Where possible, try to take a nap to help reduce the feeling of fatigue. Set an alarm for 20 minutes, lay down in a dark, cool room and try to sleep. When your alarm goes off, it's important to take up to 10 minutes to walk around and, if you'd like, have a cup of coffee to help alleviate any grogginess (sleep inertia) before returning to work.

Use caffeine strategically – remember caffeine only hides or postpones the effects of fatigue; it does not replace the need for sleep.

Caffeine takes effect 15-30 minutes after consumption and can last up to 5 hours. Drinking multiple cups a day or just one at the same time every day will lead to tolerance and dependence. Sugar can negate the benefits of caffeine, and be aware of caffeine in other drinks and food products. Avoid caffeine in the morning when your body is naturally waking up; the caffeine will only speed up the process and contribute to tolerance.

Relook at how you and your team schedule work

There are many tools available to assess fatigue-related risks associated with weekly and monthly work schedules. There is no such thing as a perfect work schedule as we are all individuals with unique needs. However, principles such as reducing continuous working hours, eliminating 24-hour shifts, building in time for breaks and nutrition, and adequate time for rest between shifts are all key principles of fatigue risk management.