

## **Working night shifts hits women's fertility: Odd hours 'make it 80% harder to become pregnant'**

- **Women who work shifts have a 33% higher chance of disrupted periods**
- **Women who work nights are 29 per cent more likely to have a miscarriage**
- **Shift work can cause sleep deprivation and disruption to the body clock, both of which are associated with ill health**

By [Fiona Macrae](#)

Women who work night shifts can find it 80 per cent harder to have a baby, a study has found. Any erratic work pattern carries higher risk of miscarriage, irregular periods and fertility problems compared to a nine to five routine, research by Southampton University suggests. Shift workers are twice as likely to be classed sub-fertile – meaning they fail to get pregnant within a year.

Women who work shifts are more likely to have reduced fertility levels. Shift work also increases the chance of menstrual disruption, while night work increases the risk of miscarriage

The survey of more than 100,000 women revealed that any working patterns other than permanent day shifts raised the odds of the menstrual cycle being disrupted by a fifth. Miscarriages were almost a third more common. And those who worked only nights – as opposed to working a mixed shift pattern – were 80 per cent more likely to struggle to conceive than those who did days.

But fertility doctors are urging women of childbearing age – who account for around 20 per cent of shift workers – not to quit their jobs until research is conclusive. Researcher Dr Linden Stocker, a paediatrician who works shifts herself, said that the problems may be caused by working and sleeping at irregular times disrupting a woman's body clock, which helps control key functions including hormone production, temperature, blood pressure and heart rate.

However, Dr Stocker cannot rule out other factors, such as shift workers leading an unhealthier lifestyle by being more likely to eat badly or do less exercise.

She told the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology: 'We don't fully understand why shift workers have an increased risk of certain diseases but obviously shift work impacts on your biological functioning, your psychological functioning and your social functioning.'

Dr Stocker added that making the link between sleep disruption and fertility problems does not prove that one causes the other.

Shift work causes sleep deprivation and disruption to the body clock both of which are associated with ill health

She told the meeting in London: 'If our results are confirmed by other studies, there may be implications for shift workers and their reproductive plans. More friendly shift patterns could be adopted where practical. 'We all know that in order to optimise your reproductive functioning, it is important to take into account other things as sleep.

'It is important that women get as much rest as possible, that they maintain a well-balanced diet, they take appropriate amounts of exercise and as, a shift worker myself, I appreciate that it's important to make sure you optimise the rest time you've got in order to maximise your well-being.' Researchers combed decades of medical literature for studies that looked at links between shift work and female fertility. All of the data referred to natural conceptions, rather than IVF.

The World Health Organisation acknowledges that working shifts may raise a woman's odds of breast cancer, by cutting production of a hormone that normally keeps tumours in check.

And the Royal College of Physicians has linked shift work to premature birth and underweight babies. But the latest study is one of the first to look at the very beginnings of pregnancy. Stuart Lavery, a fertility expert from Hammersmith Hospital, West London, said patients frequently want to know how to boost their odds of pregnancy – and some will give up a job they love in the hope that the change in lifestyle will help them get pregnant.

However, it is too early to advise stopping shift work. Dr Lavery said: 'There's no evidence at the moment that changing your job improves your reproductive outcome.'