

# 12-Hour Shift, Beneficial or Harmful

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## Abstract

12-hour shifts are becoming increasingly common in nursing as a result of several factors. In the U.S., many hospitals have employed 12-hour shifts because leaders in these healthcare organizations believe it's the ideal way of providing 24-hour care with enhanced continuity of staff and reduced costs. Nurses have different sentiments about 12-hour shifts with some preferring to practice longer daily hours with few shifts, allowing them higher flexibility and more days off. Nonetheless, there has been increasing concerns over possible threats to patient safety and quality of care, with major stakeholders questioning the benefits of 12-hour shifts. With the current focus on retention, increasing quality of care, and improving patient outcomes, hospital administrators need to find the balance between 12-hour and 8-hour shifts. The goal is for policy law makers to enforce a comprehensive approach to fatigue management by supporting healthful work schedules, and appropriate nurse/patient ratios at the national, state and organizational level. This project undertook and examined a search of recent peer review literature on various online databases to identify any evidence in regards to effective variability implications.

**Keywords:** Nurse fatigue • 12-hour shifts lengths • Patient/nurse safety • Job satisfaction vs. dissatisfaction • Horizons • Congruent competencies

## Introduction

Numerous research about the concerns of nurse fatigue in longer shifts have been studied over the past couple decades, and most have concluded that the odds of making patient errors increase three-folds when nurses work 12 or more hours. As a result, settings are experiencing an alarming rate of burnout that can have serious wide ranging consequences from reduced job performance; high turnover rates and medical error, as the evidence on the risks of longer shifts are building. The nursing profession changes are evidenced best practice is proven nonetheless, there has been increasing threats to patient safety and quality of care. Study suggest that the policy of moving to longer shifts to reduce overall workforce requirements reduced the efficiency and effectiveness of the workforce in delivering high quality, safe care [1].

## 12 Hour Shifts are Harmful

Nurses who work longer shifts suffer from high levels of fatigue. Studies conducted on nurses working a 12-hour shift reported that 80% of the participants reported moderate to a high level of fatigue. The studies were also quick to point out that other factors contributed to the high levels of fatigue. Participants who were older (baby boomers), were more likely to report fatigue while working longer shifts than young nurses and individuals who worked a second job or participants who had medical problems [2].

12-hour shifts are reported to be associated with job dissatisfaction, burnout, and stress. The nursing profession can be very demanding as a nurse has to provide quality care to a diverse population and most often sicker patients. Human errors are inevitable, but can be detrimental when fatigue and burnout are contributing factors. And has proven to be a challenge when nurses work longer shift lengths [3].

Medical error increases 3 folds when nurses work longer shifts according to recent research literature. "Such errors can jeopardize the health of the patient and nurse" (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2019). Nurse exhaustion limits the nurse's ability to not only performing basic care, but more importantly critical thinking decisions, which can lead to a consequence that

negatively effects both the nurse and organization. 12-hour shifts affect the health of Nurses who work longer shifts lengths often report sprains, needle stick injuries, lacerations, and often suffer from chronic musculoskeletal problems, among other health issues [4].

12-hour shifts are associated with poor patient care according to the 2016 Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems scores (HCAHPS) hospitals with higher proportions of 12 hour shifts resulted in lower patient satisfaction surveys. Impaired judgment and poor clinical decision-making abilities violates make it unfavorable for patients to receive quality care and favorable outcomes which violates the nursing ethical principles. Study suggest nurses report that their enthusiasm reduces as the hours increase meaning that they will be less motivated when attending to patients making it difficult to focus resulting in crucial missed details, and decreased critical thinking skills required when caring for complex populations [5].

## 12 Hour Shifts are beneficial

Although most studies show that 12-hour shifts are harmful, some differ. One of the reasons is continuity of care, which increases the quality of care provided to them. Patient prefer to see few less patients making it easier for the patient to form a connection, thus building a trusting nurse/patient relationship which contributes to the goal of better patient outcomes. Also, the 12-hour shift increases co-ordination between nurses. Nurses reported they feared important information getting lost in hand offs were less likely when 2 nurses working within a 24-hour period instead of reporting to 3 or more. Finally, authors who support 12-hour shifts site that nurse's report although the longer shifts are tiring they prefer working them despite what the research literature findings suggest also reported health care organizations prefer to foster long shifts because it is easier to plan and manage care. What's alarming is patient safety is not mentioned [6].

## Research Findings

The project focused on recent studies published over the past five years. The studies mainly concentrated on the length of shifts and how they affected the quality of care, and patient safety, as well as the health of nurses. The studies also expounded how these shifts led to job satisfaction or dissatisfaction, retention and the opinions of nurses, patients as well as employers on this issue. Some of the studies used supported long hour shifts saying that they increase the quality of care. Others, a vast majority refuted these claims saying that these shifts increased medical risks, decreased quality of care, and adversely affected the health of the nurses, and patient safety [7].

## Solution

Research over the years as far back as the turn of the century and beyond has clearly demonstrated that longer shifts can lead to fatigue, job

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dissatisfaction, poor nurse health, poor patient outcome and suggest moving to the longer shifts may have had unintended consequences. In 2011, the Joint Commission issued a Sentinel Event Alert to call attention to health care worker fatigue as it relates to patient safety. These studies have been ongoing from which innovative identified prevention strategy implementations has yet to make a significant difference. Today there is still an all-time high industry wide growing concerns related to fatigue, patient safety and job satisfaction due to the shift lengths of nurses. It is imperative to continue to educate nurses on the physical and mental impact of working extended shifts, recognizing when they are fatigued and an effective plan to address it. However, the concern is bigger than just educating [8].

## Conclusion

The vast majority of the studies had limitations like cultural differences, economic factors, nurse/patient ratio's, nurses with existing medical conditions, secondary jobs, and personal dynamics which all can have an impact on the results. Also, a recent study conducted resulted that changing from 12-hour to 8-hour day shifts may affect nursing staff satisfaction with their care delivery and handovers, and have a negative effect on staffing wards. Therefore, it was challenging to determine if other factors contributed to the cause. However it is clear that longer shift do pose a significant risk to nursing fatigue, and patient safety related or unrelated to other contributing factors, and studies suggest organizations fostering only 12 hour shifts should proceed with caution. Rollins (2015) recommends that future research needs to address ideal ways healthcare employers can implement 12-hour shifts without risking nurses' wellbeing or patient safety. Health care employers are held accountable when the quality of care in their facilities deteriorates. Nurse leaders and frontline nurses must embrace policy changes around shift lengths by implementing

nursing shifts that befits all nurses will increase patient outcomes as well as improve job satisfaction.

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