

OUTSIDE THE BOARDROOM

Could working the night shift end up killing you?

CHRIS TOMLINSON

Working overnight shifts can take a punishing toll on an employee's health, but a new study shows that years of pummeling the body's internal clock can also lead to severe strokes.

The research conducted by Texas A&M University has implications for the thousands of Houstonians who work non-standard hours at refineries, petrochemical facilities and dozens of other industries. Enlightened employers should study the findings as part of making decisions about shift work.

"The body is synchronized to night and day by circadian rhythms — 24-hour cycles controlled by internal biological clocks that tell our bodies when to sleep, when to eat and when to perform numerous physiological processes," said David Earnest, a professor in the Department of Neuroscience and Experimental Therapeutics.

"A person on a shift work schedule, especially on rotating shifts, challenges, or confuses, their internal body clocks by having irregular sleep-wake patterns or meal times."

Confusing the brain's sense of rhythm by working a different shift every week, or switching back to normal daylight hours during time off, takes a severe toll on the body. While previous studies showed that shift work could lead to obesity and heart problems, the new research shows a higher risk for more severe ischemic strokes, the leading cause of disability in the U.S.

Shift workers have a higher likelihood of severe brain damage and loss of sensation in the arms and legs. If the stroke takes place while the employee is working, that also means higher health care costs, longer disability periods and ultimately higher health insurance premiums for the employer.

I spent years doing shift work, first in the U.S. Army intercepting communications signals and later at the Associated Press editing copy from around the world. I've worked rotational shifts that changed every week as well as nine straight months of the overnight. I can't say that I ever felt healthy or normal on those shifts and will do anything to keep from working them again.

More than 15 million Americans work these shifts, though, and they are necessary for many jobs. But as research shows how damaging they are, employers need to minimize the effects. They can adopt the healthiest possible work patterns or limit the time someone works overnight through the course of his or her career.

Employers are responsible for maintaining a healthy workplace, and understanding the risks of shift work must be part of the equation. chris.tomlinson@chron.com

