

Iron Chef Shiftworkers

How does the food you eat affect your ability to be “fit for duty”? Primarily it is important to provide energy to your body that matches the energy you will need for your shift. Just like you fill the tank in your vehicle with fuel before going out on the road, you should fuel yourself before moving forward with daily tasks.

Matching ‘energy in’ with ‘energy out’ is a first step in the practice of keeping yourself alert while you work. Typically, the day shift requires more energy, or fuel, to be consumed because of the higher workload. With a higher workload comes a greater energy requirement. Day shift involves more movement in the Control Room and in the field, as well as dynamic coordination between the two. Mental demands may also be higher while serving on day shift, and since your brain handles most of those complexities, you must fuel your brain in ways that keep it alert and active. Water is the most vital nutrient for maintaining alertness, but clean-burning fuel runs a close second. Let’s take a look at some good options for energy-boosting fuels that are simple to prepare:

- Dried fruit mixed with nuts, pumpkin seeds, and sunflower seeds
- Lean meat with cheese, lettuce, avocado rolled in a tortilla with salsa
- Oatmeal with nuts and fruit
- Tuna with pickles, raw vegetables, and crackers
- Apple or banana, with almond or peanut butter
- Yogurt mixed with fruit, seeds, granola
- Raw vegetables and hummus or dressing for dipping
- Baked potato and a cup of chili
- Instant grits, hard-boiled eggs and a sausage link
- Soup and a sandwich

Each of these small meals contains protein and complex carbohydrates. This combination is best for providing the energy your body needs to function well.

Protein is the building block for muscle, bone, cartilage, skin, and blood. It’s also used to make enzymes, hormones, and other chemicals the body needs. Protein takes longer to break down during digestion so it keeps you feeling full longer. Complex carbohydrates provide quick energy for your brain and muscles by converting to glucose. Glucose is the energy fuel. Fruits, vegetables, and whole grains are the best sources of carbohydrates. Carbohydrates that are processed and packaged for a long shelf life, are largely stripped of their life-giving enzymes. This type of carbohydrate can leave you feeling sleepy rather than energized. Sugary foods and drinks can make you feel sluggish and can cause weight gain. Fresh is always best when it comes to consuming carbohydrates.

Because digestion slows down at night, according to our natural circadian rhythm, it’s a good practice for most of us to eat small, light meals after sundown. Heavy meals can cause sleepiness because blood becomes concentrated on the digestion process and is therefore drawn away from the brain and other organs. This may leave you feeling cold and sleepy.

Eating small, nutritious meals keeps your energy up and excess weight down. Each of the meals listed in this article is ideal for fueling your body during the night shift and helping you stay alert.

