

When the food isn't right on the night shift

By Nancy Shute, NPR

Working the night shift is bad for your health. But what if that's because the food is so lousy?

That's the provocative question raised this week by the editors of PLoS Medicine, an online medical journal.

Scientists have been making the case that shift work increases a person's risk of obesity, cancer, and sleep disorders. And then earlier this month, researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health reported that nurses who worked the night shift were more likely to have Type 2 diabetes. Being overweight accounted for part of that, but normal-weight nurses also faced a greater risk of diabetes if they worked nights.

"Although some of the effects of shift work are probably unavoidable," the journal editors wrote in this week's editorial, "others, such as eating patterns, are obvious targets for intervention." Translation: You can't change the fact that night work messes with your body, but you can change what you put in your mouth.

The scientists who study the health effects of the graveyard shift haven't yet chronicled what those people eat. And since about 15 million people work nights in the United States, it's no small question.

But we can guess. Options for dining out at 3 a.m. pretty much begin and end at convenience stores and fast-food joints. Health-care workers, office cleaners, and others workers who don't have time to leave the building are stuck with vending-machine food if they don't bring something from home.

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