

WELLBEING SERIES

SHIFTING THE FOCUS TO NUTRITION**Gráinne Kent** PhD(c) MSc PGDip(Dietetics) BSc RD¹

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 **OPEN ACCESS ARTICLE**

Recommended Citation: Kent, G. Wellbeing Series: Shifting the Focus to Nutrition. Irish Journal of Paramedicine. 4(2). Dec 2019. <https://doi.org/10.32378/ijp.v4i2.200>

Received: 7 May 2019**Published:** 9 Sep 2019**Revised:** 10 Sep 2019 (additional information added)

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Funding/support: This information was presented at the ICoP Wellbeing Symposium in UCC, Cork on May 11. GK received a speaker honorarium for attendance.

Competing interests: None declared**Provenance and review:** Commissioned, not peer-reviewed.**Author affiliations**

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Abstract**Background**

In this wellbeing series we present practical advice for prehospital care providers, responders, and other shift workers. These articles are produced by experts in their field. Many of these topics were presented at the Irish College of Paramedics Wellbeing Symposium in University College Cork in May 2019.

Keywords: paramedic, wellbeing, prehospital, health.

For good nutrition in shift work, get the **S.H.I.F.T!**

S – Support

Self-Support

Motivation – find your reason to nourish yourself better. This usually comes from our CORE values, e.g. Health, Family/Relationships, Career etc.

Diary – Keeping a Food, Drink and Lifestyle Diary (for yourself and no one else) can not only make us aware of our behaviours but can also be a motivational tool in itself to make nutritional changes. Make sure to ask yourself ‘why’, to gain greater insight into your habits.

Family Support

Sit down and talk to your family. How can they support you? How can you fit family time in around your shift work? It may be helpful to plan meals together, batch cook, plan your physical activity - activities you and the family love to do.

Support from your Organisation

Is there more that can be done? Better scheduling? Better provisions and facilities at base to support healthy lifestyles? Nutritional information provided on induction? Nutritional counselling provided during training?

H – Healthy Choices

Some general healthy eating and drinking messages to be mindful of:

- Eat more veggies and fruit!
- Eat more wholegrains, i.e. wholewheat/grain bread, wholewheat pasta, noodles, etc.
- Reduce red and processed meats
- Reduce salt intake (highly processed foods, ready meals, takeaways)
- Less foods high in fat/sugar (chocolate, crisps, sweets)
- Question your relationship with alcohol! Is it helpful?

I – Information

Some reliable nutritional information sources with guidance for shift workers:

The European Food Information Council: www.eufic.org

Dietitians of Canada: www.dietitians.ca

Shifting Nutrition: www.worksafe.qld.gov.au

Safefood: www.safefood.eu

Summary of guidance for shift workers

- Consume healthy, balanced meals and snacks in line with a regular day
- Prepare meals to avoid making unhealthy food choices
- Moderate caffeine and alcohol consumption
- Stay well hydrated
- Be mindful of food choices
- Exercise and sleep well to maintain health

F – Fad Diets

Stop dieting. Take the focus off of weight loss. The pursuit of weight loss for the sake of weight loss is not necessarily healthy! Focus on nourishing yourself instead.

Find other ways to measure your health, e.g.

- Increase in fruit and vegetables
- Improved aerobic fitness
- Improved strength
- More energy
- Less reliant on snacks high in fat and sugar
- Better able to recognise your hunger and fullness signals

T – Timings

General guidance on appropriate times to eat and drink during/after shift work.

Day Shift	Night Shift
<i>When you wake</i> Breakfast meal to give you energy for the day ahead	<i>After your shift & before sleep</i> Small breakfast to help you sleep and stop you from waking due to hunger
<i>During your shift</i> Lunch meal and snacks to keep you alert and energised	<i>Before your shift</i> Lunch meal to give you energy for the shift ahead
<i>After your shift</i> Dinner meal (small if just before sleep) to help you sleep and stop you from waking due to hunger	<i>During your shift</i> Small dinner meal or snack early in shift Small snack every few hours to keep you alert and energised

Make TIME to

- Plan and prepare meals and snacks - Having an idea of what meals and snacks you're going to prepare during the week can help reduce shopping costs and can help plan family time.
- Batch cook if necessary—Batch cooking can go hand-in-hand with meal planning. Having meals prepared is a great way to avoid impulse takeaways when you get home from a long shift.
- Plan your physical activity around your shift time. It's important to engage in physical activity that you like to do, to ensure its sustainability. For example, gardening, cycling, walking in the park are all great forms of keeping physically active. Planning this into your week can also help you plan some family time.

Eat your main meal before going to work

If you are starting work in the evening/at night, have your main meal a few hours before you start. If you are on the afternoon shift, have your main meal around noon. Include a variety of protein, carbohydrate and fats to offer better satiety and a slow release of energy throughout your shift. Have small meals/snacks throughout your shift. Eating large meals during the night can cause heartburn, bloating or constipation.

A small meal before bedtime can help you sleep

It's hard to sleep when you're really hungry (or really full). A bowl of wholegrain breakfast cereal or wholegrain toast might be a good option here.

Avoid fried, fatty and spicy foods during shift work

Gastrointestinal problems are common during shift work. These types of foods are difficult to digest. Avoid foods such as hamburgers, fried chicken, chips etc. to reduce the risk of heartburn, indigestion, etc.

Drink plenty of water

Even minor dehydration can reduce concentration and cause fatigue and can impact your physical and mental performance. Bring a water bottle and fill it often. If you dislike plain water, try fruit segments in the water or small amounts of sugar-free cordials if this doesn't cause gastrointestinal upset.

Limit caffeine

Limit caffeinated drinks to before or at the beginning of your shift. Switch to decaffeinated drinks at least 4-5 hours before the end of your shift to aid restful sleep.

Avoid smoking or alcohol before bed

These stimulants can interfere with restful sleep. Consider smoking cessation services and question your relationship with alcohol. Is it helpful?

Nutritious snacks

Some nutritious snacks include a piece of fruit, unsalted popcorn, handful of unsalted nuts, sticks of vegetable with hummus or guacamole, wholegrain crackers, oat cakes or rice cakes (try these with hard boiled eggs or mini tins of tuna), roasted chickpeas, yoghurt.