



Rest periods

What are rest periods?

Rest periods are provided to workers in order to preserve their safety, health and well-being. They are particularly important in jobs which require a fast pace of work or a high degree of vigilance. Where individuals or small groups determine the pace of work, informal arrangements for taking breaks may be sufficient to allow for adequate rest. However, where the work-pace is set by the machinery being used, or where workers are highly interdependent, explicit rules on the number, timing and duration of rest periods are advisable.

How are rest periods regulated?

The right to a minimum period of weekly rest was established for industrial workers in the Weekly Rest (Industry) Convention (No. 14), 1921, and later extended to workers in commerce and offices by the Weekly Rest (Commerce and Offices) Convention (No. 106), 1957. Both of these instruments fix a minimum of 24 hours of uninterrupted rest every seven days, although the Weekly Rest (Commerce and Offices) Recommendation (No. 103), 1957, suggests a 36-hour rest period.

The European Union Working Time Directive guarantees a rest break for

workers of at least 11 hours between shifts and during their working day when this is longer than six hours. The duration and frequency of these breaks are regulated by collective agreements or national legislation in the individual EU Member States. Legislation on rest periods has also been enacted in a number of countries outside of Europe. In the United States, for example, regulations on rest periods can be found in some states. The table below lists the minimum duration of rest periods and the number of hours of work after which a break must be taken for selected countries.

Country	Rest break duration	Daily working time threshold
Brazil	1-2 hours	6 hours
Estonia	30-60 minutes	4 hours
Japan*	45 minutes	6 hours
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	60 minutes	6 hours
Nigeria	60 minutes	6 hours
Republic of Korea*	30 minutes	4 hours
United Kingdom	20 minutes	6 hours

* 60 minutes' rest is required if work exceeds eight hours.

Source: Conditions of Work and Employment Database (2004).

The benefits of regular rest periods

Rest periods have benefits for both employers and employees. Regular rest periods contribute towards preserving and improving worker health and well-being. Breaks can also improve the hygiene and security of workers and increase their efficiency, and can be a means to enhance the adhesion of workers to the corporate philosophy.

Case example

Researchers from the University of Swansea, United Kingdom, studied the accident records of a car assembly plant over a three-year period. The shift-work schedule at the plant was typical of many industrial settings: two-hour periods of work were interspersed with short breaks (one ten-minute and one 15-minute break), and the employees were also entitled to a longer (45-minute) meal break. The researchers found that the risk of accidents during the last half-hour of a two-hour period of work was double that of the first half-hour, suggesting that more frequent breaks could reduce accidents. The authors concluded that increasing the frequency of rest periods for factory workers who operate machinery could substantially reduce their risk of industrial accidents, and that frequent short breaks (e.g. ten minutes per hour) can improve performance at work.

Source: P. Tucker, S. Folkard and I. Macdonald: "More frequent rest breaks could reduce industrial accidents", in *Lancet*, No. 361, 2003, p. 680.

