

Health Council of the Netherlands Report No. 2006/15E, June 29, 2006
Night work and breast cancer: a causal relationship?

The review finds evidence for an increased incidence of breast cancer among women who work the night shift for several decades. There is no reason to conclude that the association is causal.

The Health Council have reviewed the evidence linking breast cancer to night work. Their summary reads as follows:

The Committee concludes that there is an association between the prolonged performance of night work (i.e. over a period of decades) and increased incidence of breast cancer. However, the currently available data do not warrant the conclusion that breast cancer is actually caused by the night work. Nor is there any evidence as yet for a mechanism that could explain this association. The Committee therefore makes recommendations for further research.

In the Committee's opinion, the research findings do not, at present, justify recommending special measures for women who perform night work for prolonged periods in addition to the current breast-cancer screening programme. If new, scientifically sound research findings were to produce evidence of a causal relationship then one could consider what specific measures need to be taken.

The relative incidence rates suggest a 50% increased incidence of breast cancer among women who work the night shift for several decades.

Comment

Recognised risk factors for breast cancer in women include low rates and durations of breast feeding and, remaining childless. Both could be more prevalent among women who work night shifts. If factors such as these are the reason for the 50% increased incidence in female night shift workers it is difficult to see what duty could be expected of the employer. Breast cancer manifestation is most likely before the usual age of retirement.
