

# Gastrointestinal Complaints Related to Eating and Drinking Habits and Work Life of Intensive Care Nurses in Zonguldak, Turkey

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*The purpose of this descriptive study was to determine the effect of self-reported work life and nutritional habits of intensive care unit nurses in the incidence of gastrointestinal complaints. This study of 110 nurses found that long work hours at night and incorrect eating and drinking habits affect their gastrointestinal system.*

*Keywords: Gastrointestinal complaint, Gastrointestinal system, Nutritional habits*

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## ■ BACKGROUND

Intensive care units (ICUs) are stressful and complex units where difficult life and death decisions are made. Nurses work on rotating shifts to provide high-quality patient care 24 hours a day.<sup>1</sup>

Today, gastrointestinal problems (GIs) have become global health issues because of irregular nutritional habits as a result of rapid industrialization.<sup>2</sup> Intensive care unit nurses who work for different shifts for long periods also face these problems caused by incorrect and irregular nutritional habits because of irregular lifestyles and disturbances in their biorhythms. Among the most common problems they face are sleep disorders, GI problems (stomachache, constipation, diarrhea, stomach and intestinal flatulence, abdominal pain, abdominal distention), and fatigue, which are generally short

term but vary in severity with the intensity of shift work.<sup>1,3-7</sup> A review of the literature revealed that all of these problems are experienced more commonly in shifts that last 12 hours or more.<sup>1,7</sup> The reason for this is that in human beings at night, the gastrointestinal (GI) system makes a transition to rest with a decrease in enzyme activity, digestive movements, and gastric emptying. During this period, the consumption of food and drink may be difficult for the digestive system, and this increases the severity of GI problems.<sup>5</sup>

For nurses to be able to avoid these reported health problems and maintain healthy lives, they need to consume nutritional elements in adequate amounts according to their age, work, and physiological status. Their health is clearly connected to their adequate and balanced nutrition.<sup>2</sup>

Recommendations based on the data obtained in this study to prevent GIs and to eliminate other problems and sleep disorders include the following:

- ICU nurses should be scheduled to work 8- or 12-hour shifts.
- Those who have digestion disorders, particularly those with chronic gastritis, gastroduodenitis, and colitis may choose to not be employed in ICUs.
- Light- and high-carbohydrate foods, fruit, and vegetables should be consumed at night, particularly soups and foods with oats.
- During work hours and particularly at night, thirst should be quenched with fruit juices.
- During work hours, milk and sugar-containing drinks should be avoided.
- At night before 1 AM, low-fat foods with less than 600 calories should be consumed.<sup>4,9,12,15</sup>

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