



Snooze you before drive

During the holiday season, many will be looking forward to an extended leave period and time with their family and friends. While you may be eager to begin this period of rest and relaxation, don't be in a rush to jump in the car after a long day of work. The extended hours we face and the associated lack of sleep could equal danger on the open highway.

It is difficult to attribute crashes to sleepiness because there is no test to determine its presence, as there is for intoxication. In addition, there are no standardized criteria for making the determination of driver sleepiness, and there is little or no police training in identifying drowsiness crash factors.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimates that approximately 100,000 reported accidents annually (about 1.5 percent of all crashes) involve drowsiness or fatigue as a principal causal factor. A conservative estimate of related fatalities is 1,500 annually, or 4 percent of all traffic crash fatalities. At least 71,000 people are injured in sleep-related accidents each year, and NHTSA estimates that these crashes represent \$12.5 billion in monetary losses annually.

Drowsiness or fatigue could play a role in crashes attributed to other causes as well. About 1 million crashes annually — one-sixth of all accidents — are thought to be produced by driver inattention. Sleep deprivation or fatigue makes such lapses of attention more likely to occur.

Unfortunately, a lot of people drive sleepy. In a 1999 National Sleep Foundation (NSF) poll, 62 percent of all adults surveyed reported driving a car or other vehicle while feeling drowsy in the prior year. Of those surveyed, 27 percent reported that they had, at some time, dozed off while driving, and 23 percent of adults stated that they know someone who experienced a sleep-related crash within the past year.

You can't control your own sleep and, if you're tired, you can fall asleep at any time. Just as you can fall asleep at any time, you can also fall asleep anywhere and that includes on the road. While driving, people tend to fall asleep more often on high-speed, long, boring, rural highways. All drivers are at risk of a sleep-related accident if they are:

- Sleep-deprived or fatigued (awake for 20 hours or more or 6 hours of sleep or less in a 24-hour period).
- Driving long distances without rest breaks.
- Driving through the night, the early afternoon, or other times when they are normally asleep.
- Taking medication that increases sleepiness or drinking.
- Driving alone.

- Frequent travelers (e.g., business travelers).

Sleep-related crashes are most common in young people, who tend to stay up late, sleep too little, and drive at night. A North Carolina state study found that 55 percent of crashes involving drivers who fell asleep at the wheel involved people 25 years old or younger, with a peak age of occurrence of 20. Of those accidents, 78 percent of the drivers were male. Shift workers, people with more than one job, and commercial drivers are also susceptible to sleep-related accidents.

Prevention is the key for avoiding sleep-related crashes on the road. Before you begin a trip, you should follow these rules for safe, alert driving:

- Get a good night's sleep. The average person requires about 8 hours of sleep per night, although this figure varies from individual to individual.
- Plan to drive long trips with a companion. Passengers can help look for early warning signs of fatigue or switch drivers when needed. Passengers should stay awake to talk to the driver.
- Schedule regular stops of every 100 miles or 2 hours. Avoid alcohol and medications (over-the-counter and prescribed) that could impair performance. Alcohol interacts with fatigue and increases its effects, just like drinking on an empty stomach.

What should you do if you feel fine when you start your trip, only to get that drowsy feeling just a little down the road? First of all, look for the warning signs of fatigue, which include:

- Forgetting the last few miles driven.
- Drifting from lane to lane or hitting rumble strips, and jerking your car back into your lane.
- Experiencing wandering or disconnected thoughts.
- Yawning repeatedly or rubbing your eyes.
- Having difficulty focusing or keeping your eyes open.
- Tailgating, missing traffic signs, or missing turns.
- Having trouble keeping your head up.
- Impatient, irritable, and restless feelings.

Recognize when you are in danger of falling asleep — you cannot predict when you may nod off. Respond to the symptoms of fatigue by finding a safe place to stop for a break. Pull off into a safe area away from traffic and take a brief "power" nap (15 to 45 minutes) if you are tired. Drink coffee or another source of caffeine to promote short-term alertness, but be aware that it takes about 30 minutes for caffeine to enter the bloodstream. **TURNING YOUR RADIO UP AND ROLLING DOWN THE WINDOWS WILL NOT KEEP YOU AWAKE!** The only cure for drowsiness is sleep.

Before you get in your car this holiday or any season, make sure you have enough rest to complete your trip safely. Eight hours might seem like a long delay, but it is still shorter than forever.

Article adapted from material found on the NSF Web site, www.sleepfoundation.org