



The Expert Panel on Driver Fatigue impaneled by the National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration and National Center on Sleep Disorders produced a report on a serious emerging health problem – namely drowsy driving. The report made clear that drowsy driving leads to thousands of accidents every year.

Not surprisingly, the problem of drowsy drivers increases as individuals deprive themselves of necessary rest. The report says, *the loss of one night's sleep can lead to extreme short-term sleepiness, while habitually restricting sleep by 1 or 2 hours a night can lead to chronic sleepiness.*

Sleep deprivation leads to a serious reduction in reaction time, vigilance, attention, and information processing. Unlike drunk driving, it is nearly impossible to measure sleep deprivation as a cause of accidents. Essentially there is no trace evidence or conclusive tests that can be run. However, accidents caused by drowsy driving tend to be rather serious because the vehicle leaves its lane of travel, normally at high speed, and the driver does not attempt to brake or otherwise avoid the crash. The driver is usually alone.

Be Careful

There are several groups that are at risk. People who are especially susceptible include – males ages 16 to 29, shift workers who experience sleep disruptions and/or work irregular hours. Also, people with known untreated sleep disorders like sleep apnea and the like are at risk. Finally, the report also notes that the majority of accidents happen between midnight and 6am.

Prevention

Contrary to popular opinion, there is no credible link between turning up the volume on the radio and/or opening the windows to stay awake. There are several factors that we can pay attention to that will help in preventing drowsy driving accidents.

- Limit driving between midnight and 6am.
- Whenever possible, don't drive alone. Another licensed adult can be a life saver.
- If drowsiness becomes a problem, pull safely off the road and rest. A nap of 15 to 20 minutes followed by consuming caffeine equal to what is in two cups of coffee can increase alertness.
- People who are frequently tired can participate in a sleep study that can quickly diagnose sleeping disorders – many of which can be effectively treated.

Many roads are now being equipped with rumble strips cut into the center or shoulder of the road to alert drowsy drivers. Studies indicate that rumble strips have reduced drive-off-the-road crashes by as much as fifty percent.



Certainly anyone who has been awakened by a rumble strip has received adequate notice to pull off safely and get the rest they need before proceeding.



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