

DRIVING When Drowsy

If we do not manage our sleep and rest, our brain will begin shutting things down, in spite of us.

On a beautiful morning in 1986, a 34 year-old man awoke at 4 am and began preparations to take pictures of that morning's sunrise. The photos were for the cover of the renowned journal, Science. After the man had successfully captured the sunrise on film, he was to give a lecture in Cape Cod.

Following his lecture, the man began the long drive back to Boston. The next thing he recalls was being startled awake by the feel and sounds of gravel and uneven terrain under his tires. Fortunately, he gained control of his vehicle and was able to safely come to a stop on the shoulder. He then pulled over, took a nap, and subsequently completed his drive to Boston. That man was Dr. Charles Czeisler, MD, PhD, the Director of the Division of Sleep Medicine, Harvard University Medical School. He is also the author of the above quotation.

Stats On Driver Fatigue

You need more than will power, determination, caffeine, and clever routines to stay awake, especially when driving, in a serious state of fatigue or sleep debt. In Canada, the Traffic Injury Research Foundation and other provincial organizations estimate that 1 in 5 Canadian drivers (6.6 million) have nodded off or fallen asleep at least once while driving in the past year. Over half of Canadian drivers report driving while tired or fatigued, at least occasionally.

In a 2007 Ontario study of a million drivers, 145,000 reported nodding off or falling asleep at least once in the past year. 1 out of 4 of these drivers said that they had to either brake or steer to avoid being in a collision at least once.

Falling asleep at the wheel most commonly occurs late at night and in the late afternoon. Furthermore, drivers who report nodding off are also more likely to - report getting less than 8 hours of sleep per night, rate the quality of their sleep as poor, and experience greater daytime sleepiness.

On average, 500 people in Canada lose their lives due to traffic collisions caused partly by driver fatigue. Driver fatigue is also the primary cause in approximately 20% of non-fatal crashes. The types of drivers who are more likely to be involved with these statistics are- young males, persons with sleep disorders, drivers under the influence of alcohol and / or other drugs (including prescribed medications), night or rotating shift workers, and commercial vehicle operators.

Fatigue slows reaction time and decreases awareness. When you are tired, you are not as aware of others on or near the road. You also tend to fixate on one detail to the exclusion of other equally important details including - checking rear and side mirrors, not remembering the last few kilometers, and reverting to strategies that simply do not work.



Strategies That DO NOT Work

When experiencing fatigue or drowsy driving, the following **short-term fixes have proven NOT to work** -

- drinking coffee or caffeine-laced beverages, or taking caffeine-based pills
- opening windows or turning on the air conditioner or fan
- talking to passengers or turning up the radio / music very loudly
- stopping to eat, exercise, or relax without sleeping or napping

Strategies That DO Work

Telling yourself that you are not going to fall asleep because it is too dangerous does not work. When the pressure to sleep reaches a certain point, which is impossible for each of us to identify, the brain will simply seize control and shut things down.

The most effective things to do when planning an extended driving trip are -

- making sure that you get enough sleep before you set off
- taking the time to plan your driving schedule carefully. Do not start your trip before your usual wake up time or after your usual bed time. If possible, drive during daylight hours.
- try to avoid driving during the lows in our circadian rhythm (in the morning between 3am and 5am, and in the afternoon between 3 pm and 5 pm)
- schedule frequent rest breaks



Know Your Warning Signs

Fatigued or drowsy driving is dangerous because people are not able to predict accurately when they are going to nod off or fall asleep. As Dr. Czeisler found out, you cannot will yourself into wakefulness. When in a fatigued state or in sleep debt, our brain will take charge and start shutting things down - in spite of us. We have to effectively manage our rest and sleep. The only cure for fatigue and sleep debt is sleep.

Here are some warning signs -

- frequent yawning, drowsiness or nodding off
- sore or tired eyes
- boredom, inattentiveness or loss of concentration
- feeling irritable or restless
- slow reactions
- failing to check your driving mirrors, drifting from your lane, inconsistent speed, erratic braking, missing an exit or turn

If you are experiencing any of these warning signs, you owe it to yourself, your passengers, your family, and the unsuspecting public to pull over, get off the road, and take a nap or get a good sleep.

Sleep is the only true antidote to fatigue.

For confidential assistance
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