

Wake Up and Sleeping and Driving

By Steve Stone

While most people are aware of—if not always responsive to—admonishments about drinking and driving, many more see fatigue as a challenge rather than a warning. Instead of stopping and taking a nap, they hit the gas pedal and try everything they can to stay awake.

While driving, have you

- opened windows, hoping cool air will shock you to alertness?
- turned up the radio to spur your senses?
- munched junk food, believing a working jaw energizes a tired mind?
- relied on a travel companion to keep you awake, only to have him or her doze off?
- sped up in the belief that you'll enjoy a speed-induced adrenaline rush?
- slapped yourself or screamed?

All may work for a moment or two. None provides the needed remedy for fatigue—sleep.

“Automobile crashes caused by driver fatigue and sleepiness represent a staggering cost in terms of human suffering, as well as health-care and insurance payments,” according to sleep disorder expert Dr. John Fleetham, writing in *Recovery Magazine*.

It has been estimated that as many as 15 percent of all U.S. traffic deaths are related to dozing off at the wheel.

“Falling asleep may well be second only to alcohol as a cause of crashes,” Fleetham said. “Sleepiness without falling asleep may also lead to crashes because of the driving errors caused by impaired vigilance.”

The second annual “Sleep in America” survey, conducted early last year by the National Sleep Foundation, queried 1,014 Americans about their sleep problems and habits.

- 62 percent of adults reported driving while drowsy.

- 27 percent said they have dozed off while driving.

Drowsy driving causes at least 100,000 crashes in the United States annually, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Drivers may be excessively sleepy for many reasons, Fleetham said. Sleep is controlled by an internal body clock, with two periods of maximum sleepiness every day—one in the middle of the night between 2 and 6 a.m., and the other 12 hours later, between 2 and 6 p.m. Crashes because of falling asleep occur more frequently during these two periods.

“The amount of sleep necessary to remain alert varies from person to person,” he said. “As a basic rule, if you fall asleep in passive situations such as reading or driving, you are not getting enough sleep.”

Here are some suggestions from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety to avoid driving tired:

- Start any trip by getting enough sleep the night before. Plan to drive during the times of day when you are normally awake, and stay overnight rather than traveling through.
- Avoid driving during your body’s “down time.” Take a mid-afternoon break and find a place to sleep between midnight and 6 a.m.

- Talk with your passenger if you have someone else in the car. A passenger can also let you know when you are showing signs of sleepiness.

- If your passenger thinks you are getting sleepy, let someone else drive or pull over and sleep. A nap could save your life and the lives of others.

See: ng Just Don't Mix

Asleep Driver—Drunk Driver
Both Deadly

- Make sure both people in the front seat of the car are awake. A driver who needs rest should go to the back seat, buckle up and sleep.
- Schedule a break every two hours or every 100 miles. Stop sooner if you show any signs of sleepiness. During a break, take a nap, stretch, take a walk, or get some exercise before getting back into the car.

“Getting behind the wheel when you’re sleepy is just as irresponsible as driving when you’re drunk,” said David Willis, president of the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. “We recommend sleep, exercise to eliminate grogginess, and then caffeine. The combination allows a few more hours of wide-awake driving.”

Drivers who feel drowsy should take the feeling seriously.

“Sleep can strike without warning,” Willis said. “It only takes a second to shut your eyes, leave your lane and cause a crash.”⁴

Steve Stone is a staff writer for the *Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk, Va. This article appeared in the Dec. 2, 1999, edition. It is reprinted with permission.

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