

How to Avoid the Distraction of Drowsy Driving

Sleeping and Driving Don't Mix!



Feeling sleepy is especially dangerous when you are driving. Sleepiness slows your reaction time, decreases awareness and impairs your judgment, just like drugs or alcohol. People who are very sleepy behave in similar ways to people who are drunk. In fact, the AAA Foundation surveyed police officers and found nearly nine out of every ten officers reported they had stopped a driver who they believed was drunk, but turned out to be drowsy. Experts think that many fatal night-time single-vehicle crashes are caused by the driver falling asleep.

Danger Signals for Drowsy Drivers

People do not always recognize when they are sleepy. You may feel awake, but if you are tired you could fall asleep at any time. If you have any of the following symptoms of sleepiness, pull off the road as soon as possible and find a place to sleep.

- You have trouble keeping your eyes open and focused
- You can't keep your head up
- You daydream or have wandering, disconnected thoughts
- You yawn frequently or rub your eyes repeatedly
- You find yourself drifting from your lane or tailgating
- You miss signs or drive past your exit
- You feel irritable and restless
- You drift off the road and hit the rumble strips
- You are unable to remember how far you have traveled or what you have recently passed by

If you have even one of these symptoms, you could be sleepier than you think. When planning your route, identify places where you can nap if the need arises.

Driving can reveal your true level of sleepiness, especially in the afternoon or at night. Starting a trip feels exciting, but the alertness wears off, letting boredom and sleep take over. Here are some suggestions for ways to avoid driving drowsy:

- **Don't drive when you are sleepy.**
If you become sleepy while driving, pull over and take a break.
- **Get enough sleep the night before, especially before a long trip.**
Sleeping less than six hours increases your risk of falling asleep at the wheel; sleeping less than four hours is really dangerous. Also, don't plan to work all day and then drive all night. Research shows that a driver who has been awake 20 or more hours is at high risk of falling asleep. Travel at times when you are normally awake, and stay overnight rather than driving straight through.
- **Travel with a passenger.**
An alert passenger can watch you for signs of fatigue. If you have a front seat passenger, they should remain awake.
- **Take a power nap.**
Pull off the road to park in a safe place such as a parking lot or rest area; never pull over on the shoulder of the road. Be sure to pick a well-lit place where your car is visible to passersby. Roll up the windows, lock the doors, and lie back in the driver's seat for 20 minutes or so. When you wake up, get some exercise and have some caffeine.
- **Schedule a break** every two hours or every 100 miles. Stop sooner if you become sleepy. Many websites that provide directions offer the ability to indicate stopping places along the route.



If You're Tired All the Time, You May Have a Problem

A surprising number of people are tired because they have a sleep disorder that has not been diagnosed or treated. Sleep apnea, a common breathing disorder, causes the sleeper's throat to relax so deeply that breathing stops. The sleeper gasps, wakes up briefly, and then goes back to sleep. This process repeats itself, sometimes as many as 20 to 60 times an hour. The result is someone who has been in bed all night but still has not had enough sleep. Recognizing and treating sleep apnea is important, as it may be associated with an irregular heartbeat, high blood pressure, heart attack or stroke.

Check your symptoms:

- Do you snore loudly?
- Have you been told that you gasp or choke in your sleep?
- Do you spend eight hours sleeping but still don't feel rested?
- Do you experience early morning headaches?
- Are you sleepy during the day, or do you take naps a lot?
- Do you fall asleep at unusual times, such as at dinner or in movies?
- Do you have trouble going to sleep, or wake up in the middle of the night?
- These are all symptoms of a sleep disorder. If you have any of them, see a doctor who specializes in sleep medicine.