



Sleepiness 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. The impact that this has on traffic safety should not be underestimated. In fact, the AAA Foundation recently studied the prevalence and impact of drowsy driving and estimated that 16.5 percent of fatal crashes on the nation's roadways involve a drowsy driver.

What's Your Biological Time?

Your body has its own biological clock. This clock tells you when you're hungry, when you're sleepy, and makes your body temperature go up and down. Most people's clocks run on a daily rhythm of approximately 24 hours – a "circadian rhythm," meaning "about one day." But what "time" it is varies from person to person. "Morning people" feel most alert early in the day, while "night people" like to stay up late. Teenagers and young people have clocks that make them want to go to bed late and sleep late the next morning. As people get older they tend to wake up earlier and want to go to bed earlier.

Night time is very risky for drivers, since sleep can become an irresistible urge. That urge is strongest between midnight and six a.m., when drivers are especially likely to have sleep-related crashes. Your biological clock is also programmed to make you feel sleepy in the middle of the afternoon, which can be a dangerous time. Many sleep-related crashes happen between one and five p.m., during the "afternoon lull."

Think about your own biological clock. What times of day do you feel most alert? When do you feel drowsy? Do you keep a schedule that lets you follow your clock? Knowing this information can help you make the best use of your time by allowing you to factor alertness into your planning.

How much do you know about sleep?

Do you know which of the seven statements about sleep are true versus false?

- ★ **When I'm driving drowsy, all I need is some caffeine to wake me up.**
- ★ **I can tell when I'm about to fall asleep.**
- ★ **I'm a safe driver so it doesn't matter if I'm sleepy.**
- ★ **Alcohol can make you sleepy.**
- ★ **I don't need much sleep.**
- ★ **Being sleepy can lead to making mistakes.**
- ★ **Young people need less sleep.**

★ **When I'm driving drowsy, all I need is some caffeine to wake me up. FALSE**
Caffeine can indeed increase alertness, but it's no substitute for sleep. Whether from coffee, tea, soda, or candy, caffeine makes you feel more alert, but takes about 30 minutes to enter your bloodstream and the effects last only two or three hours. If you are very sleepy and drink coffee, you can still have "micro-sleeps" – tiny naps that last just a few seconds. At 65 miles per hour, you travel more than 100 yards in four seconds. That gives you plenty of time and distance to crash. Caffeine can be part of your strategy for driving alert, but it's not enough by itself.

★ **I can tell when I'm about to fall asleep. FALSE**
Sleep is not something you can decide to do or not do. Everybody who has had insomnia knows they can't make themselves go to sleep. But most people don't realize they also can't make themselves stay awake. In a AAA Foundation study of drivers who fell asleep and crashed, nearly half said they felt only "slightly drowsy" or "not at all drowsy" just before the crash. You can fall



asleep and not know it, and you can't tell how long you've been asleep. In fact, research has found that people need to be asleep for between two and four **minutes** before 50 percent of them acknowledge that they have, in fact, been sleeping. When you're driving, dozing for even a few seconds can be fatal.

★ **I'm a safe driver so it doesn't matter if I'm sleepy. FALSE**

Safe drivers are always alert. They keep their eyes open and they focus on the road, unlike sleepy drivers. Someone who is a safe driver when they're alert can become dangerous when they're sleepy. In the AAA Foundation's third annual Traffic Safety Culture Index survey of drivers, 41 percent admitted to having fallen asleep while driving in their lifetime, and more than 1/4 said that in the past month they'd driven when they were so tired they had a hard time keeping their eyes open. Despite this fact, 85 percent of respondents said such drowsy driving was "completely unacceptable."

★ **Alcohol can make you sleepy. TRUE**

To someone who is very tired, one drink feels like four or five. If you have not had enough sleep during the week and you are out on Friday night, even one or two drinks can make you dangerously drowsy on the way home. When you're already tired, don't make matters worse by drinking – and remember that the sleepiness remains, even if the alcohol has worn off.

★ **I don't need much sleep. FALSE**

Most people need about eight hours of sleep a night. While some need more and some need less, research shows that getting less than six hours of sleep is especially risky. If you go to bed late and wake up early, you are building up a sleep debt. By the end of the week you could be dangerously tired and at risk of having a crash. You can't overcome the need for sleep with willpower, and it won't go away by itself. Sleep is a basic need that plays a vital role in your body's health and function. Just like it's crucial to satisfy your body's feelings of hunger and thirst, getting enough rest is of the utmost importance. If you do spend eight hours sleeping but still feel tired, or if you

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have trouble sleeping, you may have a sleep disorder. Most disorders can be treated; see your doctor for a referral to a sleep specialist.

★ **Being sleepy can lead to making mistakes. TRUE**

When you're tired your judgment can be impaired and your brain can play tricks on you. You may do the wrong thing, or you think you have performed a task you have not really completed. A drowsy driver may not realize that the car is going the wrong way onto a divided highway, or that the car ahead is about to stop. Everyone, including doctors, police, engineers, and drivers, becomes less competent when they are sleepy.

★ **Young people need less sleep. FALSE**

In fact, teenagers and young adults need more sleep than older adults. They often get less because they have different sleep schedules from adults. Brain chemicals that cause sleep are released later during adolescence, so teens think that being able to stay up late means they don't need much sleep. The reverse is true: They actually need around nine hours of sleep a night to be fully rested. Any less and they could end up driving drowsy, even if it's in the morning on the way to school.





Are you sleep deprived?

Millions of people have a serious sleep debt. They can get this debt in many ways – they work the night shift, hold two jobs, stay up late, work full-time while going to school, or have other scheduling problems. But some people can spend eight hours in bed and still be tired often because they have unrecognized or untreated sleep disorders.

When your sleep debt gets big enough, there is nothing you can do to stay awake. You might be able to remain alert when you're busy or excited, but as soon as it gets quiet your sleep debt takes over and you go to sleep. For example, at a party you might feel perfectly awake, but when you get into your car you start to doze. To make matters worse, partygoers often drive when they are tired and have been drinking – an exceptionally dangerous combination.



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Drive Alert ... Arrive Alive!

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 drowsiness 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, especially the night before a long trip.** Sleeping less than six hours increases your risk of falling asleep at the wheel; sleeping less than four hours is especially 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 over-night 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. If you get a Trip Tik from AAA, ask a travel counselor to point out good places to stop. Many websites that provide directions offer the ability to indicate stopping places along the route.

Danger Signs 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.

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.



Other sleep disorders include chronic insomnia, restless legs, and narcolepsy, where the sufferer falls asleep without warning during ordinary situations.

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 not feel rested?
- Do you fall asleep at unusual times, such as at dinner or at work?
- Do you have trouble going to sleep, or wake up in the middle of the night?

These are all potentially symptoms of a sleep disorder. If you have any of them, you may wish to consult a doctor who specializes in sleep medicine.

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