

Drowsy Driving: Why Falling Asleep Could Be Fatal

By Kristina Khodai

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that 100,000 crashes each year are the direct result of fatigued drivers (Drowsy Driving). Drowsy driving occurs when a person operates a vehicle while impaired by lack of sleep or extreme fatigue. Drivers should be more aware of the causes, signs, and risks of drowsy driving to avoid accidents and fatalities.

Drivers at Risk

Any driver could become fatigued behind the wheel. That means anyone could fall victim to drowsy driving. However, there are certain groups of drivers who are more susceptible. According to drowsydriving.org, young people between the ages of 18 and 29 are much more likely to drive while tired compared to any other age groups (Drowsy Driving). Other groups more susceptible to drowsy driving include: shift workers, commercial drivers, people with undiagnosed or untreated sleep disorders, and business travelers. The statistics to the right show probable outcomes and how many people fall asleep at the wheel.



Who is Affected?: Many drowsy drivers have serious consequences. (Source: drowsydriving.org)

Signs of Drowsy Driving

Although people realize they are tired while driving, the signs that accompany drowsy driving are often ignored. According to the National Sleep Foundation, “60% of Americans have driven while feeling sleepy and 37% actually admit to falling asleep behind the wheel” (Drowsy Driving). Most drivers recognize that they are sleepy, but it is hard for them to know their limits. Some of the signs of drowsy driving are listed below:

- ◇ Difficulty focusing, frequent blinking, or heavy eyelids
- ◇ Trouble remembering the last few miles driven
- ◇ Missing exits or traffic signs
- ◇ Yawning repeatedly or rubbing the eyes
- ◇ Trouble keeping head up
- ◇ Lane drifting or hitting the shoulder

If these signs are exhibited, the driver should stop and rest immediately (Drowsy Driving). Many drivers think they are able to handle it and continue driving. This puts themselves and other drivers at risk similarly to drunk driving.

Drowsy Driving vs. Drunk Driving

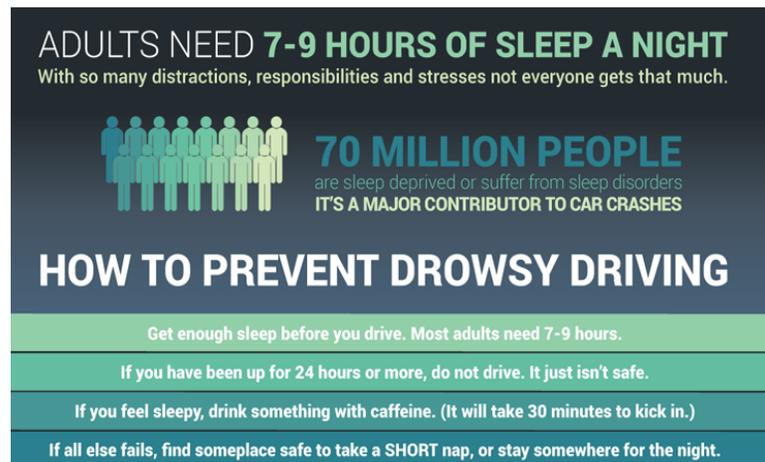
Drowsy driving can be just as dangerous as drunk driving. Sleep deprivation and consuming alcohol have similar effects on the body. Studies show “being awake for 18 hours is equal to a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.08%, which is legally drunk and leaves the driver at equal risk for a crash” (Drowsy Driving vs. Drunk Driving). This means that drowsy driving could cause a driver to be just

as impaired as a drunk driver would be. However, drunk drivers may slow down or try to react while drowsy drivers can nod off at high speeds (Drowsy Driving vs. Drunk Driving). Matt Uhles, co-director of Clayton Sleep Institute, said, “You’re more likely to die from drowsy driving than from texting while driving, distracted driving, or drunk driving combined.” He notes one in two people involved in a drowsy driving accident will be seriously injured or killed (Wolski). The best way to avoid these outcomes are to know the signs and take precautions.

Avoiding Drowsy Driving

The best thing any driver can do when it comes to avoiding drowsy driving is to know their limits and to take action when signs become apparent. The infographic to the right shares prevention tips and statistics about drowsy driving. Some of the preliminary actions that could be taken include:

- ◇ **Get enough sleep:** The average adult needs 7-9 hours of sleep.
- ◇ **Plan to take breaks:** Breaks should be taken about every 100 miles or 2 hours.
- ◇ **Take a friend along:** This gives the driver the opportunity to switch off for breaks (Drowsy Driving).



Avoiding Drowsy Driving: Sleep deprivation is a main cause, but there are many preventions for drowsy driving (Drowsy Driving).

If precautions are not made before making a long drive, there are steps that are recommended for drowsy drivers that include the following:

- ◇ **Stop driving and take a nap:** Drivers should find a rest stop or safe place to pull over and rest until they feel comfortable enough to drive (Drowsy Driving).
- ◇ **Drink a caffeinated beverage:** Drivers should keep in mind caffeine takes about 30 minutes to kick in (Wolski).
- ◇ **Be aware of rumble strips:** Rumble strips are deep grooves placed on the side of high-speed roads to alert drivers and prevent them from veering off the road (Drowsy Driving).

These precautions and safety measures can prevent accidents. This information should be kept in mind when driving long distances. Knowing how dangerous drowsy driving is, the signs, and precautions will help drivers to keep the roads safe for themselves and others.

Works Cited

- “Drowsy Driving: Facts and Stats.” *Drowsy Driving*. National Sleep Foundation, 2018, drowsydriving.org.
- “Drowsy Driving vs. Drunk Driving.” *National Sleep Foundation*, 2018, <https://sleepfoundation.org/sleep-topics/drowsy-driving-vs-drunk-driving-how-similar-are-they>.
- Wolski, Chris. “How to Avoid Drowsy Driving.” *Automotive Fleet*. July 2014, <http://www.automotive-fleet.com/channel/safety-accident-management/article/story/2014/07/how-to-avoid-drowsy-driving.aspx>.