

## Drowsy Driving

SDA Fact Sheet - AT03

©2006 Sleep Disorders Australia, South Australian Branch

**Drowsy Driving:** Have you ever been driving and suddenly found your eyelids droop, your eyes go out of focus, you can't stop yawning and you can't remember driving the last few kilometres? If so you have been a "drowsy driver" and you're not alone! A 2003 survey by the National Sleep Foundation in the United States found that 60% of adults surveyed reported driving while feeling drowsy. Twenty percent reported that they had actually dozed off while driving

**Drowsy drivers cause accidents.** Road accident statistics show that at least one in six crashes are mainly the result of driver inattention or lapses. In single vehicle accidents on country roads up to one quarter of deaths are the result of the driver falling asleep. In Australia the cost to the community of road crashes involving drowsy driving is estimated to be \$2 billion per year.

**Being sleepy is like being drunk.** Research from the Centre for Sleep Research in Adelaide has shown that after 17 hours without sleep you drive as poorly as if you had a blood alcohol level of 0.05 and after 24 hours without sleep it's the same as a level of 0.10. So if you get up at 7 am and drive home at midnight, you've been up for 17 hours and you are driving as poorly as if you were drunk.

**Who is most at risk?** You might think the elderly, but this is not the case. Statistics show that 55% of drowsy driving accidents involved people 25 years or younger. Shift workers also have a high risk as do long distance truck drivers. People with sleep disorders such as sleep apnea may also be at particular risk.

**Drowsy driving can be avoided.** The first thing to do is to recognise the warning signs and act on them. If any of these things happen, you are in real danger of having a drowsy driving accident.

- Your eyes close or go out of focus by themselves
- You have trouble keeping your head up
- You can't stop yawning
- You have wandering thoughts
- You don't remember driving the past few kilometres
- You drift between lanes, off the road, or miss signs

**Prevention is better than cure!** There is no substitute for sleep. If you need to drive a long distance, particularly at night or in that sleepy period straight after lunch, make sure you have had plenty of sleep the night before. Most accidents happen when you have had less than 6 hours sleep. If you have to drive through the day, try to take a siesta after lunch. Better still, rotate the driving. Don't rely on lots of coffee, loud music, open windows or passengers to keep you awake. These will only delay the inevitable. If the signs are there, stop!

**A "power nap" may get you out of a difficult situation.** If you must continue driving and there is no-one else to share the duties, a short nap may refresh you enough to continue driving for another couple of hours. Pull over to a quiet spot, recline the seat and take a nap of about 15 minutes, not much longer. After your nap get out of the car, walk around for 5 minutes and then drive on. Be aware of the signs of drowsiness and avoid the temptation to go just that little bit further. Remember, most accidents happen within a short distance of home.

**We don't tolerate drunk drivers on our roads, why should we tolerate drowsy drivers. Don't let you or one of your friends be another drowsy driver who "died in his sleep".**

### A Quiz for Drowsy Drivers

1. **Coffee overcomes the effects of drowsiness while driving.** **FALSE**  
Stimulants are no substitute for sleep. Drinks containing caffeine, such as coffee or cola can help you feel more alert, but the effects last only for a short time.
2. **I can tell when I'm going to fall asleep.** **FALSE**  
Don't be embarrassed if you said "TRUE." If you're like most people, you believe you can control your sleep. In a test, nearly four-fifths of people said they could predict when they were about to fall asleep. They were wrong. If you're drowsy, you can fall asleep and never even know it. You also cannot tell how long you've been asleep. When you're driving, being asleep for even a second can kill you or someone else.

- 3. I'm a safe driver so I can cope with being sleepy. FALSE**  
The only safe driver is an alert driver. Even the safest drivers become confused and use poor judgment when they are sleepy. In order to be a safe driver you must have your eyes open — and that means staying off the road when you're sleepy.
- 4. I can't take naps. FALSE**  
Many people insist they can't nap. Yet even people who say they are not tired will quickly fall asleep in a darkened room particularly if they have not had enough sleep. If you think you can't nap, stop the car and recline for fifteen minutes anyway. You may be surprised at how quickly you fall asleep once you give yourself the chance.
- 5. I get plenty of sleep. FALSE**  
Chances are good that you really aren't getting all the sleep you need. The average person needs seven or eight hours of sleep a night. If you go to bed late and wake up early to an alarm clock, you probably are building up a sleep deficit during the week.
- 6. Being sleepy makes you misjudge things. TRUE**  
Have you ever driven at night and seen something you thought was an animal but turned out to be a paper bag or a dead leaf? That's only one of the many ways sleepy drivers misjudge their surroundings. A drowsy driver doesn't process information as fast or as accurately as an alert driver and is unable to react quickly enough to avoid a collision.
- 7. Young people need less sleep. FALSE**  
In fact, teenagers and young people need more sleep than people in their 30s. They often get less, because they enjoy staying up late. Teenagers and young adults who get up early tend to feel alert in the evening. They think that means they don't need much sleep. The problem is, the temporary alertness wears off later, and they can end up driving home drowsy.

Adapted from the quiz "HOW SAFE A SLEEPER ARE YOU?", AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, 1996.

**DISCLAIMER: INFORMATION PROVIDED IN THIS FACT SHEET IS GENERAL IN CONTENT AND SHOULD NOT BE SEEN AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR PROFESSIONAL MEDICAL ADVICE. CONCERNS OVER SLEEP OR OTHER MEDICAL CONDITIONS SHOULD BE DISCUSSED WITH YOUR FAMILY DOCTOR.**

[Close this window to return to Sleep Disorders Facts Summary](#)