

The Science of Drowsy Driving and Tips to Avoid It

Almost all American drivers know that it is against the law to operate a vehicle while they're incapacitated from using drugs or alcohol. However, what most people don't realize is that driving after a poor night's sleep can be just as dangerous.

Driving after pulling an all-nighter can cause you to operate as if you have a blood-alcohol level above 0.10. In all states, this level is breaking the law.

The Facts About Driving Drowsy:

In a 2012 study, more than 4 percent of drivers admitted to falling asleep at the wheel. Researchers thought that number was low, according to the New York Times, since drivers who pass out for a moment may not realize it.

The statistics reported on accidents caused by drowsy driving are likely higher than listed because the figures are based on police reports. Most drivers are not going to tell the police officer responding to their accident that they fell asleep at the wheel.

"Although data collection methods make it challenging to estimate the number of crashes that involve drowsy drivers, some modeling studies have estimated that 15 to 33 [percent] of fatal crashes might involve drowsy drivers," the CDC's Jan. 4, 2013 Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report states.

Younger people, between the ages of 18 and 44, were more likely to say that they were driving drowsy than their older counterparts. People that work on shifts, like grocery store clerks or factory workers, are also more likely to report

driving drowsy. Commercial truck drivers were also more likely to report driving while tired, due to the long drives they do as part of their jobs.

People who snore are more likely to report driving drowsy, usually because of undiagnosed sleep disorders like sleep apnea.

How to Recognize You're Driving Drowsy:

What are some of the signs that you should pull over? If you catch yourself not able to remember the last few miles you've driven, find yourself drifting between lanes or yawning frequently, it's time to take a break.

How to Avoid Driving While Drowsy:

The best thing you can do for yourself to avoid drowsy driving is to get a good night's sleep. The CDC recommends 8 hours of sleep a night. You can help yourself by making sure your sleep environment is right for the way that you sleep – whether that means buying a new mattress or changing the type and number of pillows you sleep with. Those who have to sleep during the day should utilize blackout curtains to avoid having sunlight disturb their rest.

For those who must be on the road for long hours, both caffeine and naps can be useful in combating sleepiness. Naps tend to be more effective than caffeine for some people, mostly younger drivers. NASA swears by the 26-minute nap, with an extra 15-minute buffer before you get back on the road. Older drivers will see more of a benefit from caffeinated beverages.

The best option for is to do both. Drink a caffeinated beverage, take a quick nap, and wake up feeling more alert!

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