

# Asleep at the wheel

Sleepy drivers are a major public health and safety problem

AUTO SAFETY

**W**e're all guilty of it at one time or another. You didn't get enough sleep the night before or you're incredibly tired from an exhausting day, but you still get behind the wheel, pry your eyes open and try to keep them on the road...

Some experts say drowsy drivers are just as dangerous as drunk drivers. While most people are aware of the dangers of getting behind the wheel after drinking alcohol, many people don't think twice about getting behind the wheel when they're sleepy. But you should.

Sleepy drivers contribute to about 100,000 motor vehicle crashes reported to police each year, to about 4% of all fatal crashes, and 31% of fatal-to-the-driver commercial truck crashes. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of unintentional injury death in the United States. But the AMA's Council on Scientific Affairs, as reported in this issue of *JAMA* (page 1908), believes the role that sleepiness plays in those crashes is largely underestimated, and drowsy drivers pose a major public health and safety threat.

The Council encourages an increased awareness of the relationship between sleepiness and motor vehicle crashes. It points to research that has shown that the only way to reverse your body's need for sleep is to sleep. It also believes that your doctor can play a role by encouraging you to follow good sleeping habits, recognize when sleepiness may be due to a sleep disorder, help you obtain further evalua-

tion and treatment, and counsel you about the risks of driving while sleepy.

*Additional Sources: National Safety Council, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, National Transportation Safety Board, AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety*

## WHO'S AT RISK?

- All drivers who are sleep deprived, driving long distances without rest breaks, driving through the night, taking medication that makes them drowsy or drinking alcohol, driving alone, and frequent travelers
- Young people (55% of fall-asleep crashes are people under 25)
- Shift workers (nonconventional work schedules contribute to fatigue)
- Commercial drivers (who drive long miles and at odd hours)
- People with undiagnosed sleep disorders (up to 40 million Americans suffer from sleep disorders; the majority are undiagnosed)

## DANGER SIGNS FOR SLEEPY DRIVERS:

- Eyes closing or going out of focus by themselves
  - Trouble keeping your head up
  - Yawning nonstop
  - Wandering, disconnected thoughts
  - Not remembering driving the last few minutes
  - Drifting between lanes, tailgating, or missing traffic signs
  - Jerking the car back into the lane
  - Drifting off the road and narrowly missing a crash
- If you have even one of these symptoms, pull off the road and find a safe place to sleep.*

## SAFE DRIVING TIPS:

- Get enough sleep the night before any trip; most people need an average of 7 to 8 hours
- If you become sleepy while driving, the only safe alternative is to stop driving and find a safe place to take a nap
- Avoid driving during your body's natural "down time" (midnight to 6 a.m.)
- Don't drive alone, don't start lengthy trips late in the day, and avoid long drives at night
- Schedule a break every 2 hours or every 100 miles; stop sooner if you experience 1 of the danger signs

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Auto Safety Hotline  
800/424-9393  
800/424-9153 (TTY) or [www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov)
- National Sleep Foundation  
202/347-3471 or [www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org)
- AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety SASE (business size) to: *Wake Up!*  
1440 New York Ave., N.W.  
Washington, DC 20005 or [www.aaaftr.org](http://www.aaaftr.org)
- National Safety Council Publications Department  
Attn: *Safe Driving Guide*  
1121 Spring Lake Drive  
Itasca, IL 60143  
(include check or money order for \$1 for shipping and handling) or [www.nsc.org](http://www.nsc.org)

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Mi Young Hwang, Writer

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

Jeff Molter, Director of Science News

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