

## National Safety Council Crash-Free June Fact Sheet

# Driver Fatigue

***Just like drugs or alcohol, sleepiness slows reaction time, decreases awareness, and impairs judgment.***

***Just like drugs or alcohol, it can be fatal when driving.***

It's one of the most unnerving experiences in driving: You've been on the road a while. The highway seems endless—long, smooth, monotonous. The car interior is warm. You're tired. The radio isn't holding your attention, and neither is the driving. You stare straight ahead, at miles and miles of road, as you start to feel your shoulders sag, and your eyes slowly... start to... close.

Abruptly, you open your eyes, jerk up in your seat. You've started to drift out of your lane, or maybe even off the road. You steer your car back into the lane, take a few deep breaths, and realize, fearfully, what just happened. You were asleep.

Fatigue on the road can be a killer. It happens frequently on long drives, especially long night drives. You may have recognized some warning signs of fatigue in the foregoing scenario. Other signs of fatigue include back tension, burning eyes, shallow breathing, inattentiveness, and any kind of erratic driving, such as drifting, abnormal speed, tailgating, or failure to obey traffic signs.

37% of drivers have nodded off for at least a moment or fallen asleep while driving at least once in their driving career

8% have done so in the past six months

One cause of fatigue is alcohol consumption. Alcohol is a depressant, and a driver doesn't have to be drunk to fall asleep at the wheel. Even one drink can be enough to induce fatigue.

Another culprit is the nature of modern highway driving. Most car interiors have comfortable, cushioned seats in quiet, carpeted, temperature-regulated environments. Many vehicles have "cruise control." Most major roads have been engineered to eliminate sharp curves, hills and bumps. Ironically, these designs for comfort contribute to falling asleep at the wheel.

Additionally, dull landscapes, the droning of tires and engines, and the repetitive patterns of oncoming headlights, trees, poles and highway center lines can lead to a dangerous, trance-like state known as "highway hypnosis," which deadens drivers' senses and slows their reaction time.

Fatigue behind the wheel is a very real danger, even if you've never experienced it firsthand. The National Safety Council offers these tips for staying awake while you're driving:

An obvious cause of fatigue is lack of sleep. If you haven't received seven or eight hours of sleep the night before a trip, you're courting fatigue. Get enough rest. And don't start a trip late in the day. Long-distance driving is hard work, and you need to be fresh and alert.

If possible, don't drive alone. Passengers can take turns driving and also serve as conversation partners to keep you awake.

Avoid long drives at night. The glare of lights, both on your dashboard and outside your car, increases the danger of highway hypnosis.

Adjust your car's environment so that it helps keep you awake and alert. Keep the temperature cool, with open windows or air conditioning in the summer and frugal amounts of heat in the winter. Turn the radio volume up, and switch stations frequently, but avoid soft, sleep-inducing music. Do not use cruise control; keep your body involved with the driving.

Watch your posture. Drive with your head up and your shoulders back. Tuck your buttocks against the seat back. Legs should not be fully extended, but flexed at about a 45 degree angle.

Take frequent breaks. At least every two hours, stop at a gas station, restaurant or rest stop. Get out of the car, walk around, even jog or do calisthenics. Exercise fights fatigue. In addition to exercise breaks, stop for light meals and snacks. Avoid alcohol entirely. Don't allow your eyes to become fatigued or hypnotized. Wear sunglasses to fight glare (but never wear sunglasses at night).

If anti-fatigue measures fail and you start noticing the danger signs of fatigue then there is only one solution. Sleep. Find a safe, guarded rest area, truck stop, or service station. Even a 20-minute nap may refresh you enough to get to a hotel or motel. (This is an emergency maneuver. Do not try it as a common driving technique.)

Safe driving demands your full attention. If you feel your eyelids getting heavy, then your next actions may not simply determine whether you'll stay awake. They might determine whether you'll stay alive.

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