



Drowsy Driving: What You Can Do

What is Drowsy Driving?

Drowsy driving, or fatigued driving, occurs when a person is driving while feeling tired, drowsy, fatigued, or less than fully alert. In one study, 41% of Americans reported falling asleep behind the wheel at least once, and one in 10 admitted they had within the last year¹. But impairment due to drowsy driving occurs far before you doze off.

Drowsy driving is often compared to driving under the influence of alcohol because of similar performance effects. A person who is drowsy or fatigued may experience decreased vigilance and response time, putting them at increased risk for crashes.

What Causes Drowsy Driving?

Drowsy driving occurs when a driver is tired or fatigued. Fatigue could be acquired prior to driving, or developed during the drive. There are several causes of fatigue and drowsy driving including sleep loss, time of day, and time on task.

1. Sleep Loss

Driving performance can decrease when a person gets less than the recommended seven hours of sleep a day. In fact, driving after sleeping only 5 to 6 hours a day nearly doubles your risk of crashing.

2. Time of Day

Time of day also affects our ability to drive safely. Research consistently shows that nighttime driving puts you at greater risk of crashing compared to daytime driving. This is due to our circadian rhythm which is our body's natural body clock that regulates our sleep-wake cycle.

3. Time on Task

Time on task fatigue develops when we do the same task for extended periods of time. It is difficult to remain attentive and vigilant while conducting the same behaviors for extended periods of time and driving often involves repetitive, sedentary behaviors. Some may refer to this as highway hypnosis.



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What Are the Signs of Drowsy Driving?

Humans cannot always recognize their own fatigue, but there are signs to look for to determine whether or not you are alert enough to drive. A driver experiencing the following signs of drowsiness should pull over and rest:

- Drooping, heavy eyelids or frequent blinking
- Yawning repeatedly or rubbing your eyes
- Daydreaming or wandering thoughts
- Nodding or trouble keeping your head up
- Drifting from your lane, tailgating, or hitting a shoulder rumble strip

How Can I Avoid Drowsy Driving?

Everyone experiences fatigue during the day which makes avoiding drowsy driving difficult, but understanding the causes of fatigue and knowing what to do if you find yourself driving while drowsy, can help keep you safe.

These tips will help you avoid drowsy driving:

- Get at least seven hours of sleep a day, especially if you will be driving
- Avoid driving if you've been awake for 16 hours or more
- Take breaks at least every 2 hours of driving
- Do not drive after consuming alcohol or medications that may cause drowsiness

If you find yourself on the road and feeling tired, pull over to a safe location and park. Take a 20-minute nap or make other arrangements to get to your destination. Caffeine can help promote alertness but may only help for a short period of time, so it's best not to rely on caffeine.

¹AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety report, The Prevalence and Impact of Drowsy Driving, 2010



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