Driving Drowsy Is a Lousy Idea



What’s at Stake

Fatigue is difficult to prevent when your job takes you on the road a lot. It’s hard to say ?no? to a trip or to stop for sleep when there’s a delivery to make or a customer to see.

What’s the Danger

Overnight driving is especially tough because most people’s body clocks say it’s time to sleep. Studies show truckers are most vulnerable to fatigue in the early morning between 3 and 5 a.m., as well as the late afternoon between 3 and 5 p.m.

One symptom of fatigue is called highway hypnosis. It occurs when you have been driving a long stretch of straight road with few distractions. It also can occur when rain, snow or fog conditions limit visibility. You lose your sense of speed and you become unconcerned with the dangers. Things just seem to be drifting by and you fall asleep.

Example

A judge in Alberta, Canada imposed a 30-month jail term on a sleep-deprived dump truck driver who caused a fatal crash.

The dump truck driven by Michael Scott Ernst, 40, crashed into nine vehicles stopped at a traffic light, killing Lorraine Faren, a 40-year-old mother.

The truck was traveling at nearly 50 kilometers an hour (30 miles an hour) when it slammed into Faren’s car, which was the last in the lineup at the light. Faren, whose vehicle was run over and crushed by the large truck, died at the scene.

According to the judge, Ernst was overtired and knew he should not have been driving, yet he did so, with tragic results.

How to Protect Yourself

Here are some techniques for preventing fatigue behind the wheel, whether you are a professional driver or just take the occasional long trip:

- Get an adequate amount of good quality sleep before you drive.
- Try not to drive during your normal sleeping hours.
- Plan your route so that you reach highway rest areas or overnight accommodation in time for your sleep period. Looking for a place to park can cut into your sleep time.
- Do not eat a heavy meal before you drive.
- Save it until after your driving shift.
- Do not drink alcoholic beverages before driving. Also avoid medications that can cause drowsiness’ read the labels and talk to your pharmacist.
- Keep the cab temperature reasonably cool, with good circulation of fresh air. Open a window if necessary.
- If possible, shift your seating position frequently.
- Take breaks every two hours. Get out and walk around in the fresh air for a few minutes. Do stretching exercises to keep limber and alert.
- Drink plenty of water.
- If possible, change drivers frequently.
- Don’t just stare at the road ahead. Keep your eyes moving and watch the traffic all around you. Use your rear view mirrors often to check the traffic behind and beside you.
- Read all the traffic signs.
- Check the instrument panel frequently, especially to monitor your speed.
- Music on the radio or a talking book can help you stay alert.
- Keep your vehicle properly maintained to eliminate exposure to carbon monoxide gas. A small dose can cause dizziness and drowsiness and a larger dose can be fatal.
- Wear good sunglasses in bright sunlight to prevent fatigue caused by eyestrain.
- Learn to recognize the signs of fatigue. If you find you’re getting sleepy, get off the road and take a nap.

Final Word

Don’t drive drowsy! Get enough sleep before your shift, and if you can’t stay alert, pull over! Once fatigue sets in, the only solution is sleep.