

RSA

# Driver Fatigue

## The facts

STOP,  
HAVE A COFFEE,  
TAKE A NAP.

VISION  
ZERO

# Drunk with Tirednesszzz?

Fighting sleep at the wheel can be as dangerous as driving over the legal alcohol limit

## IF YOU HAVE TO KEEP DRIVING:

1. Find a safe place to park
2. Drink 2 cups of strong coffee or a stimulation drink containing caffeine
3. Take a nap for no more than 15 - 20 minutes



STOP. SIP. SLEEP.



**Driver Fatigue**  
Wake up to it!

# A tired driver's story

“It was early evening and I'd been on the road for a couple of hours. I was due a rest break, but the road was clear so I was keen to push on, my drop was only 20 kilometres away. I felt relaxed, but my mind was wandering and I found it difficult to concentrate. My eyes started to close and I had to struggle to keep them open. So, I wound down the window and turned up the radio to wake myself up a bit. The next thing I knew I was in hospital, I'd fallen asleep at the wheel and ended up in a field. Luckily no one was seriously injured, but it could have been so much worse.”

Parts of that story will be familiar to many drivers who drive for a living. Many of us have experienced that feeling of drifting off while driving.

But recent high-profile collisions have highlighted how disastrous the results can be if you ignore the warning signs. While it is dangerous to drive when tired/fatigued it is not illegal. If you lose control of your vehicle due to being tired/fatigued however, it is likely you will end up in either a criminal court facing a prosecution and/or a civil court facing a claim from an aggrieved party.



## Driver tiredness - the facts

According to a European Road Safety Observatory (ERSO, 2018) report on Fatigue:

- Fatigue is a major factor in a large proportion of road traffic collisions (10-20%) and is associated with increased crash risk.
- Fatigue leads to slower reaction times, poor steering and a reduced ability to keep a sufficient distance from the vehicle in front. It is associated with both reduced capacity to drive safely, and decreased motivation to do so.

According to a 2020 publication by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents:

- Fatigue related crashes are more likely to result in a death or serious injury as they tend to occur at higher speeds. This is because a driver who has fallen asleep cannot brake or swerve to avoid/reduce the collision impact.

Research has shown that tired drivers are a major road safety risk, both to themselves and to others. A survey by the European Transport Workers' Federation (2021) reported that:

- 60% of truck drivers and 66% of bus and coach drivers regularly feel tired when driving.
- 30% of truck drivers and 24% of bus and coach drivers reported falling asleep while driving at least once in the last 12 months.

## The five main causes of driver fatigue are described as:

### **Lack of sleep or poor sleep**

The average person needs 8 hours of sleep every 24-hour cycle. In addition to the quantity of sleep, the quality of sleep is very important. Interrupted sleep, as with too little sleep, can lead to fatigue.

### **Internal body clock (circadian rhythm)**

Fatigue is linked to the body's circadian rhythm, which is an internal biological clock. The human body has a greater need for sleep at certain times in the 24-hour cycle than at other times (approximately between midnight and 4am, and 2pm-4pm).

### **Time-on-task (long working hours)**

Prolonged activity, including prolonged driving, leads to physical and mental fatigue. Professional drivers, for example, often face long working hours, including early starts.



### **Monotonous tasks (lack of stimulation)**

A task is monotonous when it is predictable or there is a high level of repetition, which can lead to fatigue. Driving on motorways where the road environment remains similar and traffic volume can be small, for example, can be defined as a monotonous task.

### **Individual characteristics including medical conditions**

Individual characteristics such as age, physical condition, use of alcohol etc. can influence how quickly drivers get fatigued, and how well they cope with fatigue.

## **The following groups are particularly at risk from Driver Tiredness**

- **Young drivers** - Adolescents need more sleep than adults, but often don't get enough. Late-night driving, combined with sleep debt, poor experience with coping with fatigue and overall driving inexperience can explain the high risk of sleep-related collisions among young adults, and particularly young males.
- **Professional truck drivers** - Driver fatigue is a particular problem for truck drivers, as the demands of the long-haul transport industry interfere with optimal rest. Truck drivers typically work long hours, which can include prolonged hours at night on monotonous roads, irregular hours and have early starting times.
- **Taxi drivers** - As with truck drivers, taxi drivers are also prone to fatigue-related risks, as their work often requires long hours and driving at all times of the day/night.
- **Company car drivers.** Unlike truck drivers, the work and driving hours of this group are not regulated. Consequently, it is not uncommon to rise early to drive to a meeting on the other side of the country, work all day and then drive back again.
- **Shift workers** - While the extent of fatigue experienced with shift work can vary across the type of work, timing of work hours, shift schedule (fixed or rotating), number of days off and personal characteristics (e.g., age), overall shift work is associated with chronic sleep loss, which increases collision risk.
- **Drivers with medical conditions** - Daytime fatigue can be caused by sleep-related or general medical conditions. Drivers with Obstructive Sleep Apnoea Syndrome (OSAS) for example, experience fatigue and sleepiness due to continuously disrupted sleep.



## Issues for truck drivers

Truck drivers fall into several high risk groups: shift work, long hours behind the wheel, regularly driving during the peak times. These all add up to a particularly high risk for sleep-related collisions. In addition, being out on the road all day makes it hard to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

## Reasons why you may feel sleepy.

- Are you on any medication?
- Are you working when you would normally be asleep?
- Are you getting less sleep than normal?
- Are you working hard or have had a physically/emotionally draining day?

## Are you on any medication?

Some medicines can cause daytime sleepiness. Many of the ‘over-the-counter’ treatments for colds, flu and hay-fever, that can be bought without a doctor’s prescription, also cause unwanted sleepiness which might impair your work or driving. These medicines usually contain one or more of a group of substances called antihistamines. As well as reducing a runny nose, sneezing, allergies, etc, some also cause marked sleepiness, and because of this they are also sold (in different packaging) as sleep aids.



## Are you working when you would normally be asleep?

Sleeping when you would normally be awake (e.g. in the middle of the day) can cause excessive sleepiness during your working day. Throughout the 24 hour period we have a natural biological rhythm which affects body temperature, hunger, thirst and most importantly- our alertness. This can have an important effect on our working lives, especially if we are working at times when we are prone to sleepiness.

- There are distinct peaks and troughs in our biological rhythm.
- These troughs can also combine with boredom and monotony to increase the risk further.
- We are most vulnerable to sleepiness at around 12-4am & 2-4pm.
- These sleepiness troughs are worsened by poor sleep previously. This is particularly dangerous in safety critical industries such as transport.
- Employees are also at risk when driving home after work.

## Are you getting less sleep than normal?

If your quality of sleep is poor, this could be due to certain medical conditions which cause excessive daytime drowsiness.

### Sleep apnoea - a common problem

Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA) is a medical condition that causes difficulties in breathing during sleep. Typical symptoms are excessive snoring, choking or stopping breathing during sleep. You may be suffering from sleep apnoea and be unaware of the problem, as you seem to sleep through the night. But because you stop breathing many times during sleep your body goes into 'emergency mode' and wakes you up with a gasp for air. The result is that the next day you find yourself nodding off, due to the very poor quality sleep you had the night before. OSA is a problem mainly suffered by men, aged over 50. Key indicators are a large collar size and obesity. There are devices now available that can help the problem if it is diagnosed. If you suspect that you may suffer from OSA speak to your doctor who will advise you on your condition and where and how to seek help. Often it is the partner of a sufferer who is the first to know.



Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA)

## What can you do to minimise risk?

### Before Driving

- Prepare yourself for driving by ensuring you get adequate sleep.
- If you need treatment for hay-fever, allergies, cold or flu, be sure to mention to your GP or pharmacist that you drive, and ask about the medicine's side effects and how this may affect your driving. You may also ask about non-sedating alternatives.
- If you are a shift worker, then those you live with have a major part to play in ensuring you get quality sleep. Shift work can be hard work for your family/friends as they have to adjust to your hours. But it is essential that they understand how important it is for you to get adequate sleep.
- Simple measures like making people aware of what shift pattern you are on, putting your phone on silent or flight mode etc, letting delivery people know that there is a shift worker sleeping, or putting a "Do not disturb sign" on the door, can all contribute to better quality rest.



## During a journey

Prepare your journey properly and plan where you can take a safe break from driving.

**Stop.** Park in a safe place when you feel tired. If you're on the motorway don't stop on the hard shoulder, take the next exit and find somewhere to park.

**Sip.** Drink two cups of strong coffee or a stimulation drink containing caffeine.

**Sleep.** Caffeine takes about 20 minutes to take effect, so try and have a short nap of no more than 15-20 minutes. Much more than this and you might wake up feeling groggy. Remember to lock the doors before settling down for your nap.

However, these should only be considered emergency counter measures. If you are a professional driver you should not be relying on these on a regular basis, but instead should consider what changes you can make to your lifestyle which will help you get the sleep that you need.

## Minutes from home?

Don't be tempted to keep driving when you are tired just because you are close to your destination. Tiredness-related collisions can occur within a few minutes of the driver's destination because the driver has relaxed and the body takes this as a signal that it is okay to fall asleep.

Many of the things people do to stop themselves falling asleep at the wheel are not effective.

The following do not work and will refresh you only for a short while:

- Getting out of your vehicle to stretch your legs
- Opening the window
- Turning on the radio
- No amount of will power will keep you awake

## While At Home

If you are a professional driver you should take more long-term steps to reduce your tiredness. This is likely to involve some changes to your personal lifestyle and will need the cooperation of your family and friends. Make sure they understand how important it is that you get good quality sleep.

Sleep problems are the number one complaint among shift-workers, and you can expect to be losing some sleep on most schedules. Remember the effects of sleep loss build up day by day, as you accumulate a sleep debt. Don't begin a schedule "in the red". Maximise the amount of sleep you get before going back to work. Aim to begin any work period as well-rested as possible. When you are working shifts, particularly night shifts, you may have trouble getting the sleep you need in one block. You should still try to get at least as many hours of sleep as you need to feel well-rested on a day off. Particularly if you are working nights, you may need to sleep in the morning and then again before you go back to work in the evening.

Naps can also be very beneficial, but keep them to no more than 20 minutes and don't substitute naps for getting proper sleep. In some parts of the body clock cycle you feel especially sleepy, and in other parts you do not. You will feel sleepier in all parts of the cycle if you have a sleep debt. If you are struggling to stay awake, that sleepiness is a signal you need to get some sleep. Take a 15-20 minute nap to refresh yourself.



On the other hand, if you are not feeling sleepy, you cannot force yourself to fall asleep. If you wake up spontaneously and cannot get back to sleep within 15 - 30 minutes, then get out of bed. If you have limited time available for sleep, try doing something quiet, like reading or something else relaxing to help you fall asleep. Lying awake worrying about being unable to sleep is not useful.

## Good sleep habits - 10 tips for getting good sleep

- 1.** Avoid stimulants. Tea, coffee and smoking in the evenings can disrupt your natural sleep patterns. Try a hot milky drink or herbal tea instead.
- 2.** Don't over-indulge. Too much food or alcohol, just before bedtime, can interrupt sleep. Alcohol may help you fall asleep initially, but will disturb your sleep later on in the night.
- 3.** Your bedroom should provide a restful place for sleep. It should be cool, dark and quiet. Consider removing things that will keep you awake, such as the TV, phones and devices.
- 4.** Try to get to bed at the same time every night- weekends included. Doing the same things each night just before bed prepares your body for sleep.
- 5.** Try to relax before going to bed. Have a warm bath, listen to some quiet music, do some yoga as these all help to relax both the mind and body.
- 6.** Don't lie in bed worrying about getting to sleep. If you can't drop off in a short while then get up and do something you find relaxing until you feel sleepy again - then go back to bed.
- 7.** Deal with worries by making a list of what needs to be done the next day.
- 8.** Try to get up at the same time every morning, irrespective of whatever time you eventually fell asleep that night. A constant rising time helps to reset the body's own natural clock regulating sleep and wakefulness.
- 9.** Although regular exercise will help you to relieve the stress of the day, avoid exercising too close to bedtime or you may find it difficult to sleep.
- 10.** If you are feeling drowsy but need to keep driving drinking two cups of strong coffee or a stimulation drink containing caffeine, then taking a break and having a short nap will certainly help. However, avoid napping for longer than 15-20 minutes, much more than this and you might wake up feeling groggy. It may also interrupt your regular sleep patterns.

*The Road Safety Authority would like to thank "Awake" for its permission to reproduce extracts and images from their "Driver: Tiredness Kills" booklet.*

Údaras Um Shábháilteacht Ar Bhóithre  
Road Safety Authority

Páirc Ghnó Ghleann na Muaidhe, Cnoc  
an tSabhaircín, Bóthar Bhaile Átha Cliath,  
Béal an Átha, Co. Mhaigh Eo, F26 V6E4.

Moy Valley Business Park, Primrose Hill,  
Dublin Road, Ballina, Co. Mayo, F26 V6E4.

Tel: (096) 25 000 Email: [info@rsa.ie](mailto:info@rsa.ie)  
Website: [www.rsa.ie](http://www.rsa.ie)

RSA

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