



# CIRSA HAZARD ALERT

Published by the CIRSA Loss Control Department

Your Partner in Risk Management

## In the Driver's Seat: Beating Driver Fatigue

### Workers and driver fatigue

Today's workforce has increased workloads, larger coverage areas, and longer hours behind the wheel. In this challenging environment, driver fatigue is inevitable. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) conservatively estimates that 100,000 police-reported crashes are caused by fatigued drivers, resulting in more than 1,550 deaths and 71,000 injuries. This represents up to 17% of all fatal vehicle crashes.

What causes driver fatigue? Is it preventable? What measures can be taken to reduce the risk?

### Risk factors

Workers whose sleep is interrupted by working at night or irregular shift hours face the greatest risk of an accident. Long hours behind the wheel in a demanding job, such as snowplowing during heavy storms, can diminish an individual's critical response time. Prevention requires pre-planning on the part of the driver to help reduce the risks. There are other notable risk factors:

- **Medications and alcohol**

Medications have long lasting effects on the body. After five nights of partial sleep deprivation, three drinks will have the same effect on your body as six would when you've slept enough.

- **Diet and meal times**

If your digestive system is busy digesting a large, fatty, or unbalanced meal, some energy is taken away from pumping oxygen to the brain, which we need to keep us awake and alert.

- **Caffeine and its effects**

Although it can be beneficial, caffeine takes 30 minutes to absorb into the system and its effects last only 2-3 hours. Remember that as the effects of the caffeine diminish, withdrawal or "crashing" will occur, increasing the potential for drowsiness.

- **Undiagnosed sleep disorders**

Drowsiness or fatigue can also be caused by various medical sleep disorders, such as sleep apnea, narcolepsy, and insomnia. According to the National Institutes of Health, an estimated 50% of sleep disorders remain undiagnosed.

- **Sleep deprivation**

In our fast-paced society, lack of sleep is commonly the greatest risk factor. If you are like most people, you believe you can control your sleep if you are drowsy, yet you can fall asleep and never know it. Sleep experts recommend a range of 7-9 hours of sleep for the average adult to maintain optimal body functionality. However, sleep requirements vary person to person.

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## ***Driver Fatigue (cont.)***

### **Warning signs**

There are generally one or more warning signs which accompany drowsy or fatigued driving. Drivers should learn to recognize these warning signs and take action when they occur:

- Feeling irritable, restless, or aggressive.
- Frequent yawning, rubbing of the eyes, or nodding head.
- Difficulty in focusing, frequent blinking, and/or heavy eyes.
- Daydreaming, experiencing wandering, or disconnected thoughts.
- Missing signs or driving past an intended exit.
- Drifting from your lane, drifting off the road, or tailgating.

### **Prevention**

In recent years, external controls have been developed in an attempt to control driver fatigue. These systems are commonly integrated into a vehicle by the manufacturer and use facial recognition, lane measurement, or behavior recognition to identify drowsy driving and alert the driver. While these technologies can help, please do not rely on them.

The surest method of prevention is for drivers to apply and practice personal controls to reduce the risk of fatigue and drowsiness. Here are some tips you can use to stay safe:

- Stay hydrated – water is better than sugary sports drinks.
- Use caffeine, but beware of its limitations – it is preferable to use it during the last 2-3 hours of driving and avoid it during the early part of the shift. Overuse will result in reoccurring withdrawal “crashes.”
- Get a good night’s sleep. The average person requires about 7-9 hours of sleep a night.
- Eat well-balanced, healthy foods. Start by replacing fast food and unhealthy meals with healthy snack options.
- Eat in smaller portions at 1 to 2 hour intervals – this helps your body keep the blood and oxygen flowing to your brain instead of spending a lot of energy digesting food.
- Walk around your vehicle, bend, stretch, or perform other exercises to stimulate blood flow and reduce fatigue. These micro-breaks will keep your body active.
- If possible, drive with a companion on long trips. Passengers can help look for early warning signs of fatigue or switch drivers when needed. Passengers should stay awake to talk to the driver.
- Avoid alcohol and medications that impair performance. Alcohol and medication may contribute to fatigue, exacerbating its effects.
- Consult a physician or a sleep disorder center for diagnosis and treatment if experiencing frequent daytime sleepiness, difficulty sleeping at night, and/or loud snoring every night.

### **Summary**

As resources dwindle and municipalities struggle to do more with less, fatigue is likely to increase and present an even greater danger among drivers. Determine the risk factors to which you are exposed. Learn to recognize the warning signs and take action when they occur. Several organizations provide information on drowsy driving, including research studies, articles, and prevention tips.

Finally, take the time to take care of yourself. Pre-plan strategies for long driving trips, eat healthy, and always ensure a restful night of sleep. Following these simple guidelines will go a long way in helping to reduce the risk of fatigued driving and keep you safe in the driver’s seat.

### References:

[Automobile Association of America \(AAA\) Foundation](#)  
[National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#)