



Managing Fatigue

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Do you find yourself nodding off? Reacting more slowly to changing road conditions, other drivers or pedestrians? Making poor decisions? Drifting from your lane? Experiencing “tunnel vision” (when you lose sense of what’s going on in the periphery)? Experiencing “microsleeps” (brief sleep episodes lasting from a fraction of a second up to 30 seconds). Forgetting the last few miles you drove?

These are symptoms of fatigue that left unchecked can lead to disaster. As many as one in five fatal crashes in the general population involve driver fatigue. Research shows after 17 consecutive hours awake, impairment is equivalent to having a blood alcohol content (BAC) of .05. After 24 hours awake, impairment is equivalent to a BAC of .10. While regulations set maximum numbers of driving and work hours, this approach doesn’t account for individual differences in sleep needs and health.

Fatigue results when you do not get enough sleep or quality sleep, being awake for many consecutive hours or not getting enough sleep over multiple days. According to the Centers for Disease Control, most adults need 7-9 hours of sleep a day to maintain optimal health and performance. There is no substitute for sleep. No amount of experience, motivation or professionalism can overcome the body’s biological need to sleep.

It is imperative you increase your awareness of and take responsibility for managing your own fatigue. But keep in mind, the only “cure” for fatigue is more sleep. Here are some tips:

- Be aware of your body’s sleep and wake cycle that tells you when to be alert and when it’s time to sleep. Be sure to get an adequate amount of sleep each night. Create a sleeping environment that helps you sleep well: a dark, quiet, cool room with no electronics.
- If possible, do not drive while your body is naturally drowsy.
- Limit monotonous tasks or long periods of inactivity.
- Ensure you develop a sleep schedule that includes time to commute, eat and engage in necessary personal activities.
- Maintain a healthy diet. Skipping meals or eating at irregular times may lead to fatigue or food cravings. Also, going to bed with an empty stomach or immediately after a heavy meal can interfere with sleep.
- Take a nap. If possible, you should take a nap when feeling drowsy or less alert. Naps should last a minimum of 15 minutes, but ideally a nap should last up to 45 minutes. Allow at least 15 minutes after waking to fully recover before starting to drive. Short naps have proven to be more effective at restoring energy levels than coffee.
- Avoid medication that may induce drowsiness. Most drowsiness-inducing medications include a warning label indicating that you should not operate vehicles or machinery during use.
- Recognize the Signals and Dangers of Drowsiness cited at the beginning of this article.
- Do not rely on "alertness tricks" to keep you awake. Behaviors such as smoking, turning up the radio, drinking coffee, opening the window, and other tricks are not real cures for drowsiness and may give you a false sense of security. In fact, excessive intake of caffeine can cause insomnia, headaches, irritability and nervousness. Also, it takes several minutes for caffeine to get into your system and deliver the energy boost you need, so if you are already tired when you first drink a caffeinated drink, it may not take effect as quickly as you might expect. In addition, if you are a regular caffeine user, the effect may be much smaller.
- If you feel fatigued while driving: pull over.
- If fatigue persists after adequate sleep, get screened for health problems that may be affecting your sleep.

The NPTC Monthly Driver Safety Letter, jointly sponsored by NPTC and [Centerline Drivers](#), is a Microsoft Word document that you can print out and post as is, if appropriate, or modify any way you wish to make it a better fit for your drivers, including adding your company logo. If you are already doing an in-house letter, you may find information here that you can cut and paste into your own letter. If you are interested in specific subjects, or have any comments/feedback, contact Tom Moore, CTP, at tmoore@nptc.org or (703)838-8898.