



Driver Fatigue

What is Fatigue?

Fatigue is usually described as tiredness, weariness or exhaustion. Our natural rhythms programme us to be awake during the day and asleep at night. It's more than feeling drowsy and results in reduced ability to concentrate, react quickly and make good decisions.

Sleepy driver

Problems occur if this rhythm is disrupted, particularly if we lose sleep. A person needs about 8 hours sleep per night. When you sleep fewer hours, a sleep debt accumulates. The only way to reduce sleep debt is by sleeping! Fatigue can be caused by many things, e.g., monotonous activity, shift work, extended hours, stress, family commitments, illness, etc.

Driving and Fatigue

Falling asleep at the wheel is at the extreme end of driver fatigue, because your driving can be impaired long before you nod off. Driver fatigue is extremely dangerous as it reduces the driver's ability to judge his or her own level of fatigue.

Microsleeps are brief, unintended episodes of loss of attention, often signaled by a blank stare, head snapping or prolonged eye closure. These can happen when a person is fatigued and trying to stay awake to do something monotonous (like

driving). During a microsleep, a person will not respond to outside information (like a red light or a curve in the road).

The more sleep debt a person has, the greater the chance that microsleeps will occur. Other symptoms include yawning, poor concentration, tired eyes, restlessness, slow reactions, boredom, feeling irritable, making fewer and larger steering corrections, missing road signs and having difficulty staying in the lane.





As noted above, driver fatigue is not simply related to the number of hours spent driving. This is why many fatigue-related crashes happen during road trips less than two hours long or within 20 minutes of home. Because of the natural rhythm, it is more dangerous to drive between 1am and 5am than at any other time of the day.

If you drive after staying awake for 24 hours, you are as dangerous as someone with the blood alcohol content of 100 mg/100ml (The current legal blood alcohol limit is 50 per 100ml of blood for adults aged 20 or over).

Planning Road Trips

BEFORE the trip:

- Check your planned route for places to stop, rest and refresh. Aim to stop every two hours, or as soon as you begin to feel tired. Get plenty of sleep before you set off.
- Drive when you would normally be awake. Avoid medications that may cause drowsiness.

DURING the trip:

- Stop every two hours. Get out of your car and go for a walk.
- Share the driving, whenever possible.

- Drink lots of water. Caffeine drinks may help, but only in the short-term.
- Eat sensibly during the trip but avoid large meals.
- If you think you need a nap, don't wait. Find the first safe place, pull over, move to a passenger seat and have a power nap for 20 minutes. Then have a walk around outside to freshen up before you start driving again.

Fatigue Self-Assessment Tool

To assess your fatigue levels, please check our calculate your risk sheet.