



Safety Bulletin

Avoid Driving Fatigued

“Am I too tired to drive safely?” This is a question that all professional drivers must ask themselves each day. Each year, one of the leading causes of major accidents involving commercial motor vehicles is related to drivers operating vehicles when they are too tired to drive. When commercial drivers become fatigued from excessive daily and weekly work hours, they substantially increase the risk of crashes that result in death or serious injuries. According to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA), more than 750 people die and 20,000 more are injured each year due directly to fatigued commercial vehicle drivers. The FMCSA identifies three main factors in driver fatigue: circadian rhythm effects, sleep deprivation and cumulative fatigue effects, and industrial or “time-on-task” fatigue.

The FMCSA has developed Hours-of-Service (HoS) regulations to help prevent fatigued driving issues. These HoS regulations have been in place since the 1938, have been revised multiple times, and are expected to be revised again in 2011. The main purpose of the HoS is to prevent accidents caused by driver fatigue. This is accomplished by limiting the number of driving hours per day, and the number of driving and working hours per week. Fatigue is also prevented by keeping drivers to a 21 – 24 hour schedule, maintaining a natural sleep/wake cycle. Drivers are required to take a daily minimum period of rest, and are allowed longer “weekend” rest periods to combat cumulative fatigue effects that accrue on a weekly basis. Despite these measures, many drivers are still involved in fatigue-related driving incidents, even without violating these regulations.

The risk of having a sleep-related accident varies due to several factors. Fatigue-related accidents often occur at times typical for maximal sleep (during night and mid-afternoon hours). People who have undiagnosed sleep disorders and those who are knowingly sleep-deprived have a higher likelihood of experiencing a sleep related accident. Among drivers, sleep disorders are more common than diabetes, seizure disorders, or alcoholism. One study suggests that people who operate

vehicles in a fatigued state can perform as poorly as legally intoxicated drivers.

Drivers are caught between two competing priorities with regard to this issue. Delivering their shipment on time and operating their vehicles safely. They are required by their company safety departments to operate safely at all times and to be proactive in identifying potential problem areas and take corrective actions to prevent accidents or injuries. Some drivers, however, may be reluctant to shut down early in order to rest, for fear of repercussions from the dispatch staff for not completing the delivery in a timely manner. Whether or not these fears are realistic, the driver must ultimately make the decision if he or she can operate the vehicle safely, and if not, act responsibly and get off the road.

It is important for drivers to be aware of the common signs that a driver may experience when too tired to operate the vehicle safely. Some signs include:

- excessive yawning
- eyelids feel heavy
- hard to keep vehicle between the lines
- loss of ability to concentrate
- periods of “zoning out”
- erratic speed control issues

Once you start experiencing these signs, you need to get off the road and get some rest. There are a lot of products sold over the counter that claim to help you stay alert, but these are not recommended, as they tend to only mask your body’s signals that you need rest! These products may also produce other negative health-related concerns, such as increased heart rate and blood pressure.

The best way to ensure that you avoid fatigue-related accidents is to be well-rested. Here are a few ideas to help you achieve that goal:

- **Use your time off wisely** - Just because you have satisfied the FMCSA’s Hours-of-Service rule and had 10 consecutive hours off duty,

there is no guarantee that you are properly rested. Studies have shown that the average person functions best after having 7-8 consecutive hours of sleep. The FMCSA mandates 10 hours off duty so that the driver can get rest and have some time for other tasks such as eating, personal hygiene and other personal time. But many drivers, especially when at home, try to maximize the time with their families, resulting in inadequate rest. There have been too many instances in which drivers get into serious accidents hours after returning back to work following a weekend off.

- **Eat properly** - Eating a well balanced diet helps a person to be well rested. Eating high-fat foods and foods with lots of caffeine can interfere with a person's sleep habits. Also, eating a big meal just prior to going to sleep can negatively affect the quality of the rest period.
- **Regular Sleeping Habits**- People who have routine sleeping habits tend to get better sleep than people who are constantly changing their sleep times. Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.

- **Routine Exercise** - Exercising the body on a routine basis has shown to help people get a more restful sleep. This may be as simple as a short walk around the truck stop or terminal yard.
- **Avoid Alcohol** - Alcohol is a depressant which can leave a person in a drowsy state. Excessive alcohol also takes away from quality sleep, making the body more restless while trying to sleep.

So please, ask yourself periodically: "Am I too tired to drive?" and answer the question honestly. If the answer is yes, it is time to get off the road and get some rest. This one question may save the lives of those around you as well as your own.

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