

RSA



# DRIVER TIREDNESS

## The Facts

Údarás Um Shábháilteacht Ar Bhóithre  
Road Safety Authority

# DRUNK WITH TIREDNESSZZZZ

**Fighting sleep at the wheel  
is as dangerous as driving  
over the legal alcohol limit**

***TO KEEP DRIVING  
FOR ANOTHER HOUR:***

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



**DRIVER FATIGUE**  
**WAKE UP TO IT!**

## Driver's Guide To Tiredness

"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 miles 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 most drivers who drive for a living. Most of us have experienced that feeling of drifting off while driving. But until recently, few of us took the issue that seriously - it was just something you had to come to terms with.

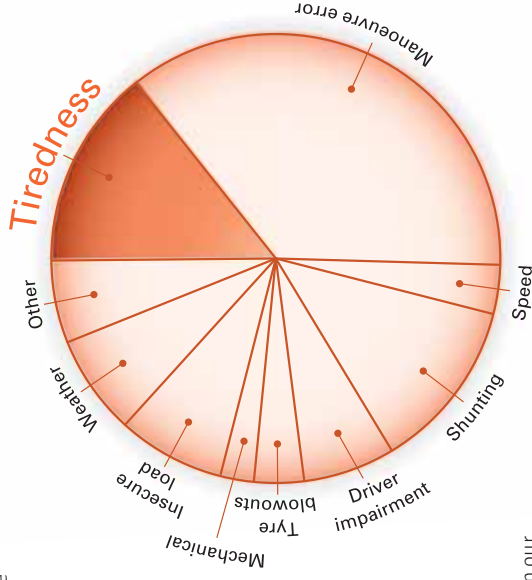
But recent high profile collisions have highlighted how disastrous the results can be if you ignore the warning signs. While foolish to drive when tired and or fatigued it is not illegal. If you lose control of your vehicle due to tiredness and or fatigue it is likely you will end up in either a criminal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



## Driver Tiredness - The Facts

Research has shown that tired drivers are a major road safety risk, both to themselves and to others. The extent of the problem is only now starting to be understood:

- Across Europe at least 4,000 people are killed each year as a result of driver tiredness
- Research indicates that driver fatigue could be a contributory factor in 1 in 5 driver deaths in Ireland\*
- Tiredness-related collisions are 3 times more likely to result in death or serious injury because of the high impact speed and lack of avoiding action.



- These collisions tend to occur when our body rhythms are at a natural low point during the early hours of the morning typically between 2 and 6am) and between 3 and 5 in the afternoon.

- In the early morning a motorist is 13 times as likely to have a tiredness-related collision as some one who is driving in the middle of the morning or early evening.

*\*Professor Jim Horne, Head of the Sleep Research Laboratory, Loughborough University, UK, advising the RSA has said driver fatigue could be a contributory factor in 1 in 5 crashes in Ireland.  
Source: Causes of road traffic collisions  
LSRC / N. Yorkshire Police, UK (1999)*

## The Following Groups Are Particularly At Risk from Driver Tiredness

We are all at risk from driver tiredness, but research has shown the following to be at particularly high risk.

- **Night workers** – especially after the first night of a shift when the body has not acclimatised to a change in sleep patterns.
- **People driving home after a night shift** (in the early morning): at this time of the day we are naturally at our least alert. This, coupled with tiredness from a hard night's work, makes early morning driving particularly dangerous.
- **Lorry drivers** (who may be more prone to sleep disorders such as obstructive sleep apnoea). This is discussed further below.
- **Company car drivers.** Unlike truck drivers their work and driving hours 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.
- **Men**, particularly those aged 18-24 and 50+. Young men have a problem admitting they are feeling tired and are more likely to push on to avoid losing face. Older men are more susceptible to falling asleep in the afternoon due to changes in body rhythms.
- **Skilled manual workers:** like company car drivers, the driving hours of this group are unregulated and so it is common to drive considerable distances to get to a job, work a physically demanding, long day, and then drive back home. This causes particular problems as tiredness builds up over the course of the week.

## 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 for sleep-related collisions all add up to a particularly high risk. In addition, being out on the road all day makes it hard to maintain a healthy lifestyle: many of us grab a bite to eat when we can and end up eating badly, rather than planning properly.

## 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?

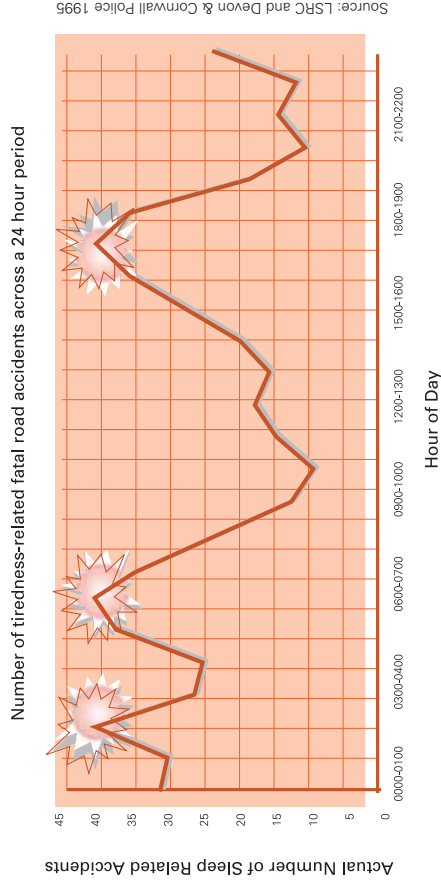
## Are You On Any Medication?

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 2-6am & 3-6pm. Driving and shiftwork collisions show peaks at these times.
- 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



Apart from the afternoon peak of tiredness-related collisions, due to the natural daily trough in sleepiness, the figure above shows two early morning peaks for these collisions: one at around 2am usually caused by people coming back late from a night out; the other, at around 4-6am, which is often associated with night work and with shift-workers driving to or from work at the beginning or end of a shift.

## 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 GP. Often it is the partner of a sufferer who is the first to know.

## 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 for a living, 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 your family have a major part to play in ensuring you get quality sleep. Shift work can be hard work for all the family 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 the family aware of what shift pattern you are on, taking the phone off the hook, 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.

## What Can You Do To Minimise Risk?

### While Driving

- Prepare your journey properly and plan where you can take a safe break from driving.
- Stop 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.
- Drink a cup or two of strong coffee or a stimulation drink containing caffeine.
- 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. As 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. Many tiredness-related collisions 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 only effective for a very limited time.

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

As 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 the rest of your family. 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 and radio.
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 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 while driving 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.

# AWAKE

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

**Fran Mitchell, 27 years old, was killed on 23rd July 2005 in a car crash just, five minutes from his home outside Greystones, County Wicklow. His brother Charlie tells his story.**

**"After working a late shift Fran went to a late movie with a friend. He drove home stone cold sober. At 1.30am he crashed into a wall and died instantly. Fran had dozed off at the wheel."**

*from 'Crashed Lives'*



**DRIVER FATIGUE**  
WAKE UP TO IT!

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**CRASHED LIVES**

# Working To Save Lives

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## Údarás Um Shábháilteacht Ar Bhóithre Road Safety Authority

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