

# *Dangers of Driving while drowsy*

*The REM Center*

Drowsy driving is dangerous and can result in injury or even death. Driving while drowsy can be as dangerous as driving while intoxicated. Just as alcohol can impair driver performance, drowsiness can slow reaction time, impair judgment and increase the risk of a crash. Falling asleep at the wheel or the inability to pay adequate attention while driving may be a result of being sleep deprived. The National Traffic Highway Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimates over 1500 deaths and over 70,000 injuries a year due to drowsy driving.

The human body runs on a 24 hour cycle and there are predictable times of sleepiness in that cycle. Most drowsy driving motor vehicle accidents occur during those times. Between 1:00pm and 4:00 pm and then again from 2:00am to 6:00am is when we are most likely to be at risk of having a drowsy driving-related accident.

Any driver who has not obtained adequate sleep is at a higher risk of being in an accident. According to The National Sleep Foundation 51% of adults reported that they have driven drowsy and 17% reported that they have fallen asleep at the wheel during the past year. The individuals at highest risk are: young drivers that are inexperienced and may not be aware of the dangers of drowsy driving; shift workers that work at times that their body is programmed to sleep; truck drivers who often work long hours trying to meet deadlines and those who drive at night to avoid traffic; and new parents and parents of toddlers that do not get enough sleep while trying to meet the demands of parenthood. These individuals are all at higher risk of being in an auto accident due to drowsiness and fatigue. You may not fall into any of these categories, but that does not exclude you from being at risk.

There are many signs to recognize so that you can be proactive in preventing an accident. Those signs are: repeated yawning, driver inattention, head drops, inability to keep your eyes open, amnesia for the last couple of miles traveled, wandering or disconnected thoughts, drifting in and out of your lane and driving over rumble strips. These are all indications that you should pull over in a safe rest area to take a nap or that it is time to switch drivers.

The best approach to prevent an accident due to drowsiness is to be sure you have had adequate rest before you begin your drive. If you cannot do that, you can reduce your risk by sharing the driving responsibilities with another person, by taking a break every two hours or every 100 miles, or by stopping and taking a nap in a safe area. These strategies are more effective than opening the window, turning up the radio, or by using energy drinks or caffeine. All of these are temporary fixes for the real problem, inadequate sleep.

It is not just important that you get adequate sleep, but it must be quality sleep as well. To do this you should try to maintain a healthy lifestyle by exercising regularly, try to keep consistent sleep schedule on weekdays and weekend, and by avoiding alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine around bedtime.

If you take this information and put it to use, you will decrease the likelihood of being in an accident due to being drowsy. No one wants to become a statistic!