

Drowsy Driving

"57% of Canadian drivers said they drove while sleepy."

When you hear the term "distracted driving," cell phones most likely come to mind. This may be due to the law a number of provinces have in place banning the use of hand-held devices (e.g., cell phones, laptops, iPods) while driving. Distracted driving, however, involves much more than cell phones and other high tech devices. In fact, there are plenty of other common distractions. Think about many of the things you might do while driving such as drinking coffee, eating, reading a map, putting on make-up, talking or arguing with others, changing CDs, brushing your hair, and more. All of these things can take your mind off of the task at hand – safe driving.

Being drowsy or sleepy can also affect your ability to drive safely. Being tired impairs your judgment, decision making, performance, response time, and places you at risk of falling asleep at the wheel. All of these things can increase the risk of injury for you and others.

Drowsy or sleepy driving is a major issue. Every year, about 400 Canadians die because of drowsy or sleepy driving (Highway Safety Roundtable, 2007). According to a survey by the Traffic Injury Research Foundation (2005), 57% of Canadian drivers said they drove while sleepy. Also, one in five Canadians admitted they've nodded off or fallen asleep while driving at least once over the past year.



Drowsy or sleepy driving can be compared to drinking and driving. Research shows that sleep-deprived individuals (i.e., individuals who have been awake for 17 to 19 hours) perform at a similar level to individuals with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level of 0.05% (Highway Safety Roundtable, 2008). Having a BAC of 0.05% is dangerous as it increases the risk for serious injury and death by about seven times when compared to alcohol free drivers (Ministry of Transportation, 2009). Research also shows that being sleepy combined with even small amounts of alcohol (a BAC below 0.05%) impairs a driver's performance (e.g., increase in lane drifting, decrease in alertness) (Horne, Reyner, & Barrett, 2003).

Like drinking and driving, there are consequences for driving while drowsy or sleepy. Drivers may be charged with a criminal offence (e.g., dangerous driving) or provincial offence (e.g., careless driving). Penalties for these offences can include demerit points, fines, licence suspension, and jail time in serious cases (Traffic Injury Research Foundation, 2009).

Other consequences of drowsy or sleepy driving may include:

- ▶ Legal fees.
- ▶ Increase in insurance premiums and medical costs.
- ▶ Loss of job.
- ▶ Loss of independence due to injury.
- ▶ Guilt (e.g., if you injured or killed another person in a crash).
- ▶ Injury or death (to self or others).



Drowsy or sleepy driving can happen to anyone at any time. However, you're more at risk after working long hours, working a night shift, staying up all night, or not getting enough sleep. You're also at a higher risk of being involved in a sleep-related crash if you have a sleep disorder, take medication that will make you drowsy, or drink alcohol before driving.

Sleep-related crashes occur more often at night or mid-afternoon, and in higher speed zones. Crashes tend to be head-on or rear-end crashes, or involve a single vehicle running off the road – all of which can result in serious injuries.

Sleepy drivers may also try things to stay awake that don't work, such as opening windows, talking with passengers, turning up the radio, drinking coffee, and so on. In fact, a survey of Canadian drivers found that only 14.8% of drivers reported stopping at a safe place (e.g., a rest area, service station) to take a nap or sleep when they were drowsy – which is what drivers should do (Vanlaar, Simpson, Mayhew, & Robertson, 2007).

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Here are some things you can do to avoid drowsy or sleepy driving:

- ▶ Get enough sleep: adults need between seven to nine hours of sleep each night.
- ▶ Take regular breaks (e.g., every two hours) when driving for long periods.
- ▶ Whenever possible, drive during daylight and try not to drive before your normal wake up time or after your regular bedtime.
- ▶ Don't take medication that will make you drowsy.
- ▶ Avoid alcohol, even in small amounts.
- ▶ Don't wait until you feel tired to stop and nap or sleep. By then, it's too late. Once you start to feel tired or drowsy it becomes difficult to predict when you'll fall asleep at the wheel.
- ▶ Know the warning signs of fatigue. Some examples of warning signs include: frequent yawning, heavy eyes, daydreaming, feeling irritable and restless, wandering over the centre line or off the road, or missing your exit or turn.

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