

Drowsy driving crashes preventable

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Meet the expert: Anita Valanju Shelgikar, M.D.

Today kicks off Drowsy Driving Prevention Week, a National Sleep Foundation public awareness campaign to educate drivers about sleep safety. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety released a new study showing that the tragedy of drowsy driving is more pervasive than shown in previous estimates. Their study shows that drowsy driving involves about one in six deadly crashes; one in eight crashes resulting in occupant hospitalization, and one in fourteen crashes in which a vehicle was towed. These percentages are substantially higher than most previous estimates, suggesting that the contribution of drowsy driving to motor vehicle crashes, injuries, and deaths has not been fully appreciated.

"This should be a wake up call to our legislators and our elected representatives," says David Cloud, CEO of the National Sleep

Foundation. "Driving while drowsy seriously affects our safety on the road. More action and education are needed to combat this problem."

Sleepiness can impair drivers by causing slower reaction times, vision impairment, lapses in judgment and delays in processing information. In fact, studies show that being awake for more than 20 hours results in an impairment equal to a blood alcohol concentration of 0.08%, the legal limit in all states. It is also possible to fall into a 3-4 second microsleep without realizing it.

"Unfortunately, statistics on drowsy driving likely underestimate the severity of the problem because drowsiness is so difficult to measure. It is impossible to gauge sleepiness after-the-fact, to determine the severity and duration of an individual's sleepiness at the time of a crash," says Anita Valanju Shelgikar, M.D., a clinical instructor in the University of Michigan Medical School's Department of Neurology. "The percentage of near-miss accidents due to drowsiness is likely an even greater problem."

These statistics illustrate that drowsy driving is extremely dangerous, says Shelgikar, whose clinical interests include sleep-disordered breathing, sleep deprivation, and restless leg syndrome. She also participates in the training of sleep medicine fellows and neurology residents.

"Dozing off for just a few seconds can be enough to cause a fatal crash. If you ever develop drowsiness while driving, it is best to pull over safely, lock the vehicle doors and take a nap. If there are other passengers with you, switch driving responsibilities with someone who is alert and able to drive."

According to the Foundation's 2009 Sleep in America poll, about one-third (28%) of Americans admitted that they have fallen asleep behind

the wheel within the past year, and more than half (54%) said they have driven while drowsy. The AAA Foundation study shows that more than a quarter of surveyed adults admitted they drove despite being so tired that they had difficulty keeping their eyes open in the previous month.

"It is shocking that so many people admit that they frequently drive in an incapacitated state," says Cloud. "The good news is that fatigue related crashes are preventable. The bad news is that there is a knowledge and awareness gap about the danger of driving when you're too sleepy. Many people think they can will themselves to stay awake no matter how tired they are, but science shows us that simply isn't true."

"Drowsy driving is a major traffic safety problem that, unfortunately, is largely unrecognized," said AAA Foundation President and CEO Peter Kissinger. "We need to change the culture so that drivers recognize the dangers, appreciate the consequences and most importantly, stop driving while sleepy."

Feeling sleepy? Stop driving if you exhibit these warning signs:

- Difficulty focusing, frequent blinking and/or heavy eyelids
- Difficulty keeping reveries or daydreams at bay
- Trouble keeping your head up
- Drifting from your lane, swerving, tailgating and/or hitting rumble strips
- Inability to clearly remember the last few miles driven
- Missing exits or traffic signs
- Yawning repeatedly
- Feeling restless, irritable, or aggressive.

More information: www.drowsydriving.org/

Provided by University of Michigan

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