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Driver Wellness

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Driver Wellness

You can improve your health and ensure that poor driver health is not putting yourself or other motorists at risk. Remember to consult your doctor for help creating and adjusting your plan for healthy living.

Federal Regulations

Driver fitness is one of the seven behavior analysis and safety improvement categories (BASICS) in the DOT Compliance, Safety, Accountability (CSA) program. Driver fitness seeks to ensure commercial motor vehicles are being operated by drivers who are fit for the job. These drivers must have all the right training, have adequate experience and be physically qualified to drive.

The current physical qualification standards for commercial drivers are in 49 CFR 391.41-49. Note that this course is about general driver wellness, so we will not talk about these standards here. The physical qualification component of driver fitness may be expanded in the future to include obesity and other wellness-related risk factors. Take wellness seriously!

Common Health Hazards

As a professional driver there are some occupational hazards that you face every day: poor health habits, injuries, fatigue and illness.

Several occupational factors contribute to driver wellness issues:

- Drivers maintain a sedentary driving posture
- Unhealthy food choices are common
- Smoking and chewing tobacco are ways to pass time
- Long hours limit time for fitness
- Staying on the road complicates access to health and fitness facilities
- Professional drivers have an increased risk of substance abuse

Effect of Poor Health

Poor driver health can increase healthcare costs for carriers. Additionally, carriers may have increased costs due to having to hire replacement or relief drivers for those who are ill or injured. There are also some indirect costs to consider. These costs are harder to quantify, but they are just as important.

A lack of driver wellness can decrease employee morale, job satisfaction and productivity, and may cause more presenteeism, where workers continue to work despite illness. It can also increase absenteeism due to illness, and employee turnover can increase due to low job satisfaction attributable to health issues. Because employees may be absent or even quit their jobs, carriers face costs associated with replacing those employees.

How to Improve Health

Your employer may have a wellness program in place to help you become healthier. The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) has sponsored several case studies about wellness programs. These studies indicate the following benefits:

- Reduction of healthcare claims and workers' compensation claims
- Decreased accident rates
- Decreased personnel turnover rates
- Early identification of health problems
- Cost savings associated with identifying potential health problems early

Your health needs care and maintenance – just like your vehicle does! Think of taking care of yourself as preventive maintenance. Create a plan that you know you can follow. Include diet and nutrition, body weight control and exercise, physical activity and physical fitness. Focus on the four Rs: refueling, rejuvenating, relating and relaxing.

Refueling

Your body needs food just like your vehicle needs fuel. The type of fuel you put in your body will affect its performance. Refueling is all about eating foods that help your body and mind perform optimally, providing extra energy and better alertness, especially while driving.

Healthy food choices will help you have more energy, obtain more restful, solid sleep and reduce your risk of high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, arthritis, stroke, obesity and other diseases. Any food can provide calories to keep your body moving, but not all foods can keep your body running smoothly without breakdowns.

Make the leap from knowing the healthiest choice to making that choice. Use the following tips to stay healthy on the road:

- Plan your food intake
- Pack/stock healthy food alternatives
- Get a cooler or refrigerator for your vehicle
- Eat when you are hungry, not because you are bored
- At buffets, do not go back for seconds
- Take your time while eating

Rejuvenating

Rejuvenating is about improving your physical condition through regular exercise and getting adequate sleep. It is like keeping your engine revved. You are probably aware that exercise helps you be healthy and strong and can help you lose weight. Exercise also gives you more energy and stamina, increases heart strength, helps you stay awake and alert, relieves stress and improves your mood, reduces the risk of heart disease, diabetes, cancer, hypertension and other diseases and makes you less likely to suffer from strains, sprains, breaks and injuries.

Use the following tips to make exercise part of your daily activities. View every stop as an opportunity to get some exercise. Park far from where you need to go so that you can walk more. Walk around your vehicle while fueling (if safe). Plan stops at rest areas with safe walking or bike paths you can use. Bring exercise equipment with you (jump ropes, bikes, weights, etc.). Plan stops at fitness centers. Be sure to stretch after long hours of sitting still.

Tips to avoid fatigue-related crashes include:

- Getting seven to nine hours of sleep every night
- Planning your itinerary to avoid driving at night, if possible
- Eating light meals and avoiding alcohol
- Not driving for more than four hours at a time
- Getting out of your vehicle as often as possible to relax and stretch

DO NOT use caffeine or other substances as a substitute for sleep.

You can also ask your organization about using driving teams, getting training about recognizing and combating fatigue and setting schedules that balance delivery requirements and drivers' rest needs.

Relating

Relating involves understanding the importance of your relationships with others. Relationships can and do impact personal stress levels, job performance and health. Benefits of strong relationships include emotional support and stress relief, improved immune system, longer life and positive attitude.

To maintain your relationships, call home often, keep track of important dates, inquire about how people are and what they're doing, send surprises occasionally, start planning activities several days before your return and express how you feel.

Relaxing

Relaxing is about learning to recognize, control and manage responses to the many stresses of life. Stress physically impacts your body. It makes your heart rate increase, blood pressure rise, muscles tense and blood sugar level rise. These physical effects can make you more susceptible to autoimmune disease, lead to hypertension, result in tension headaches, cause ulcers or other gastrointestinal problems and cause poor concentration and fatigue.

Some important things to remember when it comes to relaxing are:

- Do your best
- Do not try to control things that are not within your control
- Remember that aggressive drivers have the problem – not you
- Maintain a positive attitude
- Use defensive driving

To combat stress:

- Use the four Rs (refueling, rejuvenating, relating and relaxing)
- Talk it out with the dispatcher
- Listen to your CB radio to avoid traffic
- Listen to the radio
- Decrease or discontinue caffeine
- Take time off
- Develop realistic expectations
- Use humor
- Avoid abusing substances (drugs, alcohol, tobacco, prescriptions)