

JOB AID
Driver Fatigue

Driver Fatigue

Fatigue impairs a driver's ability to safely operate a large truck or other types of equipment. It leads to accidents that cause vehicle damage, property damage, injury and even death. The potential risks of driving while drowsy have been compared to the risks of driving while under the influence of alcohol.

Many drowsy driving crashes are unreported and undocumented. The states you drive in may have:

- Established and enforced drowsy driving laws
- Developed public information and education campaigns
- Increased training on the effects of fatigue for law enforcement
- Established graduated driver's licensing systems with curfews
- Included drowsy driving countermeasure information in driver's education manuals and classes

Drowsy vs. Fatigued

There is a distinct difference between drowsiness and fatigue. However, the effects are the same: decreased driving performance and an increased risk of being involved in a crash.

Drowsiness

Drowsiness is the expected result of inadequate sleep. You can also become drowsy due to your body's natural sleep pattern, or if you experience "highway hypnosis" (unable to recall the last few minutes or miles you have driven).

Symptoms of drowsy driving include:

- Drifting into the emergency lane or across the center line
- Cars honking or flashing their lights to get your attention
- Frequent yawning
- Heavy eyes and frequent blinking or opening them to a wide-eyed state
- Nodding off and jerking back awake frequently

Fatigue

Fatigue is not always about excessive hours and too much time on the road; there are other factors. Fatigue may be due to strenuous work, more frequent nighttime driving, extended driving times and irregular sleep schedules. Symptoms of fatigue include:

- Difficulty concentrating and thinking clearly
- Depressed, moody or anger
- Decreased motivation
- Lack of interest
- Microsleeps
- Complaints of headache, stomach or other problems
- Loss of appetite or weight

What Causes Fatigue?

The main factors that contribute to driver fatigue include time of day, inadequate sleep and time on task. A person's health can also influence how fast a driver experiences and responds to fatigue.

Time of Day

A significant factor linked to driver fatigue is time of day.

- Drivers are more likely to experience fatigue while driving late at night, between the hours of midnight and 6:00 a.m.
- Drowsiness episodes are eight times more likely between midnight and 6:00 a.m.
- 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. is another peak time for fatigue-related crashes

Lack of Sleep

Inconsistent schedules for long-haul drivers can make it difficult to get regular, quality sleep. While the ideal requirement is seven or more hours of sleep per night, most drivers only sleep about five hours during their main sleep period. Losing as little as two hours of sleep affects reaction time, mental functioning, memory, mood and alertness.

Several nights of inadequate sleep can lead to:

- Sleep debt (the cumulative effect of not getting enough sleep)
- Microsleep (brief, unintended episodes of attention loss)

Time on Task

The length of time spent on a task affects the quality of performance. As more time is spent driving without a break:

- The level of fatigue increases
- The time to react is slowed
- Attention and judgment are reduced
- Chances of falling asleep are increased

Commercial drivers frequently experience fatigue because long hours spent driving are often combined with stress, irregular hours, early start times and reduced sleep.

Managing and Preventing Fatigue

At the first sign of fatigue or drowsiness, stop for a cup of coffee, tea or cola; pull to a safe location and stretch or take a short, brisk walk; or stop driving and take a short nap. Taking a break every two hours is an effective way to stay alert. Do not continue to drive if you are struggling to keep your eyes open!

Preventive measures include:

- Getting a full night of seven to eight hours of good sleep
- Planning your itinerary to avoid driving during peak fatigue times
- Eating light meals and avoiding alcohol
- Not driving for more than four hours straight, and stopping every two hours or 100 miles
- Getting out of your vehicle to relax and stretch

Drivers who have a driving companion experience fewer bouts of drowsiness, fewer crashes and errors, and drive less aggressively.

Dispatchers need to know how to use effective and efficient scheduling to give drivers rest periods. They should not schedule drivers during late-night hours. Some organizations implement programs that support team driving, improved training and better scheduling to manage driver fatigue.