

Driver Fatigue

The early morning and the middle of the afternoon are when most driver-fatigue accidents occur. Studies show that after just 80 minutes of continuous driving, drivers are considered to be a danger to themselves and other drivers on the road. Even more alarming, according to the Adelaide Centre for Sleep Research, a driver who has been awake for 24 straight hours has the same driving performance as a driver with a BAC of 0.1 g/100ml, which makes him or her seven times more likely to get into an accident.

Fatigue is described as mental or physical exhaustion associated with a variety of factors, such as working long hours, not getting enough sleep, having to be alert for an extended period of time, and strenuous or laborious activities. Commercial drivers have experienced all of these things at one time or another, which makes their jobs extremely dangerous. Experiencing fatigue on the road and behind the wheel is something that everyone should work to avoid. Below are some tips that will help your drivers stay healthy and feel well-rested during their time on the road.

Get Enough Sleep

Be sure to stress to your drivers the importance of getting an adequate amount of sleep each night. If possible, your drivers should not operate a vehicle while their bodies are naturally drowsy, from the hours of 12 a.m. to 6 a.m. and 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., although sometimes as a commercial driver, they can't avoid this. Driver drowsiness may impair a driver's response time to potential hazards, increasing the chances of being in a crash. If drivers do become drowsy while driving, they should choose a safe place to pull over and rest.

A recent study found that driver alertness was related to the time of day rather than the "time-on-task." Most people are less alert at night, especially after midnight. This drowsiness may be increased if your drivers have been on the road for an extended period of time.

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A recent study suggests that fatigue-related incidents happen most often during the first hour of driving. The authors of the study hypothesize that drivers may be affected by sleep inertia shortly after waking from sleep. This may be especially true for drivers who sleep in the sleeper berth. Sleep inertia refers to impairment in a variety of performance tasks, including short-term memory, vigilance, cognitive functioning, reaction time and ability to resist sleep.

Maintain a Healthy Diet

Skipping meals or eating at irregular times may lead to fatigue and/or food cravings. Also, going to bed with an empty stomach or immediately after a heavy meal can interfere with sleep. Encourage your drivers to consume a light snack before bed, which may help them achieve more restful sleep. Stress to them that if they are not

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well-rested, fatigue may cause slow reaction time, reduced attention, memory lapses, lack of awareness, mood changes and reduced judgment ability.

Take a Nap

If possible, drivers should take a nap when feeling drowsy or less alert. Naps should last a minimum of 10 minutes, but ideally a nap should last up to 45 minutes. Tell your drivers to allow at least 15 minutes after waking to fully recover before starting to drive.

Short naps are more effective at restoring energy levels than coffee. Naps aimed at preventing drowsiness are generally more effective in maintaining a driver's performance than naps taken when a person is already drowsy.

Avoid Medication That Induces Drowsiness

Your drivers should avoid medications that may make them drowsy if they plan to get behind the wheel. Most drowsiness-inducing medications include a warning label indicating that you should not operate vehicles or machinery during use. Some of the most common medicines that may make drivers drowsy are tranquilizers, sleeping pills, allergy medicines and cold medicines.

In a recent study, 17 percent of CMV drivers were reported as having “over-the-counter drug use” at the time of a crash. Cold pills are one of the most common medicines that may make your drivers drowsy. If they must drive with a cold, it is safer to suffer from the cold than drive under the effects of the medicine.

Recognize That You Are Fatigued

Remind your drivers to pay attention. Indicators of drowsiness include frequent yawning, heavy eyes and blurred vision. If they are experiencing these symptoms, they should assess their situation. Can they make a stop for coffee? Pull over for a quick nap? Drivers need to take care of their driver fatigue at the first sign of it!

Do Not Rely on “Alertness Tricks”

Behaviours such as smoking, turning up the radio, drinking coffee, opening the window and other “alertness tricks” are not real cures for drowsiness and may give your drivers a false sense of security. Although grabbing a quick coffee to give them a boost may help short-term, if they still have a few hundred kilometres of driving ahead, you need to stress to them that satisfying the main cause of their fatigue by sleeping is their safest option. Let them know that excessive caffeine intake can cause insomnia, headaches, irritability and nervousness. It takes several minutes for caffeine to get into the body's system and deliver the energy boost a driver needs, so if they are already tired when they first drink a caffeinated beverage, it may not take effect as quickly as they might expect. In addition, if your drivers are regular caffeine users, the effect may be much smaller. Rolling the window down or turning the radio up may help your drivers feel more alert for an instant, but these are not effective ways to maintain an acceptable level of alertness.

New Program to Help Combat Driver Fatigue

Dealing with driver fatigue is nothing new for fleet owners and their drivers, but the North American Fatigue Management Program (NAFMP) certainly is. The program was launched in July of 2013 to provide training and education on managing fatigue for commercial bus and truck drivers, since it is such a large issue across North America.

Specifically, the program provides information on:

- How to create an atmosphere that helps reduce driver fatigue
- Fatigue management for drivers and their families, carrier managers, shippers, receivers and dispatchers

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- Different sleep disorders, as well as screenings and treatments for them
- Driver and trip scheduling
- Fatigue management technologies

Contact PL&B Insurance today to learn more about the NAFMP and ways to combat driver fatigue.