

# Impaired by fatigue? Drowsy drivers pose a danger

*Contrary to popular myth, rolling down the window or turning up the radio won't keep a sleepy driver alert*

Everyone at one time or another has experienced the effects of fatigue, the loss of alertness and impaired ability to perform tasks requiring attention. Now, this may not be hazardous if you're experiencing fatigue on a beach at Club Med but it can be dangerous—even fatal—when you're driving.

There is considerable debate about the actual scope of the problem of crashes due to sleepiness or fatigue. Current estimates are based on police recording, which may not always be accurate because unlike alcohol, there is no way of testing whether a driver is impaired due to fatigue. Additionally, crash victims may be reluctant to admit to police that drowsiness was a factor.

So what are the stats, you ask? In 1996 11 per cent of the drivers involved in fatal crashes had been sleeping or were extremely fatigued. The number of fatigue-related crashes reported to MPI in the 1997/98



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insurance year is estimated to be 10 fatal, 64 involving injuries and 3,398 involving property damage—at an estimated cost to Manitobans of \$18 million.

## Fatalities

When fatigue-related collisions do happen, they often occur at high speeds and can result in head-on collisions with other vehicles or stationary objects. Because these collisions usually occur without any pre-braking the chance for fatalities is very high.

Manitoba crash data reveals that in 1995, people under the age of 35 accounted for just over 71 per cent of the total fatigue-related collisions.

But before you write the problem off to “those kids again” take note of these results from a random telephone survey conducted by MPI in 1998:

- 38 per cent of Manitobans have serious to severe sleep disorders and require immediate medical attention
- 50 per cent of drivers surveyed had driven while drowsy within the past year
- 30 per cent had fallen asleep at the wheel without having a crash
- 3.7 per cent weren't so lucky

While fatigue can affect anyone at any time, young people, commercial drivers, people with medical conditions or undiagnosed sleep disorders, vacation and business travelers and shift workers are at particular risk. As well, all drivers who are sleep deprived, drive long distances without rest breaks, drive at times they are normally asleep, take medication that increases sleepiness, drink alcohol, drive alone or on long,

rural roads are also susceptible to fatigue-related crashes.

Unfortunately, it can be hard to realize that you are, in fact, too tired to drive. How many times have you thought “just one more hour to go...” and kept on driving, when all you really wanted to do was pull over and sleep until a rude, remarkably loud squirrel woke you up?

## Impaired

Well, the next time you're driving and you can't stop yawning, you constantly blink your eyes or shake your head, and you can't remember the scenery you just drove past, pull over and rest. You're fatigued - impaired - and you're dangerous. Remember, though, that it's illegal to park on highway shoulders, so you'll have to find somewhere else safe (and preferably well lit) to stop and nap.

There are steps you can take to avoid becoming over tired on the road. Obviously, get plenty of rest before you head out. Bring a friend to talk to and share the driving. It's also

a good idea to stretch your legs and get some fresh air every 2 hours or 200 kms (whichever comes first). And lastly, use cruise control sparingly, since it can make you feel like you're not really driving; more like you're guiding your favourite chair down Route 66.

What doesn't work? Turning on the radio, turning off the heat, or opening the windows. All you're doing is listening to noise you're too tired to pay attention to anyway, and freezing while you're at it. Coffee can be a short-term stimulant, but it only prevents sleepiness for a half hour or so, and it doesn't work at all if you regular coffee drinker.

That's all for this week. Until next week, be **RoadWise**.

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