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INFORMATION
DEDICATED TO
DRIVER SAFETY

Fatigue: Lack of Sleep

As a result of our busy lives, and 24-hour society, **lack of sleep** is now a major health problem in America today. Truck drivers face special risks. The majority of your work hours are spent behind the wheel, a hazardous place for a tired person! **Fatigue** can play a major role in accidents, although exact rates are hard to establish. Whatever the real rate of truck-involved, fatigue-related crashes, such accidents can have disastrous results and lead to loss of revenue for carriers, employers, shippers, truck drivers and their families.

No matter what we do, we cannot eliminate our need for sleep. It is as necessary as food and water. The term fatigue describes a state of mind and body and is used to describe the feeling of being tired, drained or exhausted. Fatigue reduces our ability to do work, including loss of attention, slower reactions, poor response, deterioration of judgment, and alertness.

Fatigue can develop slowly making it difficult to realize that you are too tired to drive safely. So watch out for the warning signs of fatigue, and if you experience a combination of any of the symptoms, **DO NOT DRIVE, TAKE A POWER NAP** (10 – 45 minutes), and address the factors that may be contributing to your fatigue.

SYMPTOMS INCLUDE:

- Constant yawning
- Blurred vision or sore or heavy eyes
- Difficulty keeping your head up or eyes open
- Poor concentration, i.e. you don't notice a vehicle until it overtakes you or you find yourself daydreaming.
- Variations in driving speed
- Letting your vehicle drift out of lanes
- Difficulty remembering the last few miles or the last 5 minutes
- You become impatient and make rash decisions
- Poor gear changing

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TEN STRATEGIES FOR STAYING ALERT AND FIGHT FATIGUE

- 1. Know your body's sleep needs and limitations.** Everyone needs a different amount of sleep. Are you a morning person or a night person? Recognize your sleep needs and plan your schedule to work with your body, not against it. Pay attention to your biological clock (circadian rhythm). From the hours of 1 a.m. to 5 a.m. and again from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., your biological clock pulls you toward sleep. Plan your trips carefully, including where and when to stop for sleep and rest breaks.
- 2. Review your environment.** Temperature, noise and light all give your body cues on whether to stay awake or go to sleep. Too much heat, no noise or a low humming noise can all encourage sleep. Dress in layers in the winter so you can turn down the heat and crack open a window for fresh air. Music, radio, books on tape or a conversation on the CB can help stimulate the mind. Sitting still for long periods of time is also a sure cue to your body to fall asleep. Take a short exercise break to alert your body to wake up.
- 3. Proper Nutrition.** Eat a well-balanced diet that includes the major food groups – meat, fish, fruits, grains, vegetables and dairy products. High calorie, fatty foods like French fries can make you lethargic. Light protein, for example chicken or lean meat, can wake you up. Nourishing foods give you energy to work. Consuming heavy meals is especially hard on your body between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. when your body clock tells your digestive system to slow down. It is important to drink plenty of fluids.
- 4. Reduce Caffeine.** If you do drink caffeinated beverages, avoid them when you are already alert. Save that caffeine “boost” for when you're sleepy, i.e. afternoon or predawn hours, but not too close to when you'll be ending your shift for a long sleep. Caffeine takes about 1 – 30 minutes to take effect and lasts up to 3-4 hours. Also remember that caffeine is a diuretic, so drink extra fluids to compensate.
- 5. Avoid Alcohol.** Alcohol is a drug that depresses your bodily functions, causing fatigue. Alcohol disturbs sleep, especially when taken near bedtime. Avoid it.
- 6. Quit Smoking.** Nicotine produces an initial stimulation, but is followed by a depressant phase. Smoking is incompatible with good health and has been linked to many of the diseases that cause fatigue.
- 7. Exercise Regularly.** If you spend much of the day sitting, plan an exercise program to build stamina. Poor physical conditioning can be the problem. Exercising on your days off and on work shifts can help you feel more alert and improve the quality of your sleep. If you plan to eat a main meal in the middle of a long stretch of driving, take a 10 to 30 minute walk after you eat. Research has shown that exercising 30 minutes a day, even in three 10 minute segments, can improve your health overall.
- 8. Reduce Excess Weight.** The extra pounds you carry around all day may be responsible for your fatigue. Set goals to lose a certain amount of weight over a set period of time, but avoid extreme dieting that can deprive you of needed energy.
- 9. Get Family and Friends Support for Making Sleep a Priority.** Share this information with those closest to you and talk about how important it is for you to get enough sleep. Whenever possible, prepare by getting a full night's sleep one, two or even three nights before going out on the road. A nap before work can give you an extra boost.
- 10. Get Treatment for Sleep disorders.** Many people have sleep disorders without realizing it. Most of these can be cured or treated. It has been estimated that 25-30% of commercial drivers have sleep apnea. One major risk factor is the male gender; a second is increased body mass, which indicates overweight. Studies have found that drivers with sleep apnea have 2 to 7 times the accident rates of drivers without sleep apnea.