Sleep Deprived Driving: Effects, Statistics and Regulations

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When a driver is cognitively impaired due to lack of sleep, it is termed sleep deprived driving. Sleep deprivation has been shown to be just as detrimental to the brain as alcohol. As such, it is one of the many causes of accidents on the roadway.

Sleep Deprivation Effects

Sleep apnea can often cause fatigue. More serious sleep apnea, termed obstructive sleep apnea, causes those suffering from it to have their breathing pause; preventing the personâ€™s airways from having any air flow in or out of them. This frequently results in severe sleepiness during the day. In addition to fatigue, this can also cause psychomotor deficits, sleep attacks and nighttime sleep disruptions.

The effects of fatigue and sleepiness include several impairments, such as vision, reaction time and judgment, but there are also many other issues that can be caused. These issues include decreased motivation, performance and vigilance, poor short-term memory, issues processing information, aggressive behavior, moodiness and sleep episodes termed â€œmicrosleepâ€•, which are basically 2-3 second episodes of sleep.

Studies have found that sleep deprivation affects the driverâ€™s ability by impairing coordination, causing longer reaction times and impaired judgment.

Statistics of Sleep Deprived Driving

Countless studies have indicated that anywhere from 16 â€“ 60% of accidents may be due to sleep deprivation. In a four year span (89â€™ â€“ 93â€™), the average number of individuals killed each year du sleep-deprived driving was 1544. These accidents are considered to occur most frequently in the early morning to mid afternoon hours.

Military personnel and truckers both seem to reflect that sleep deprived driving is a major issue. In fact, sleep deprivation is estimated to cause 9% of the total crashes that occur in the U.S. military. In the U.S., 12% of the crashes each year are considered a result of driver fatigue.

Crashes due to sleep apnea reportedly cost $15.9 billion dollars in the year 2000 and took the lives of 1,400 individuals. The prevalence of this issue in commercial drivers such as truckers is nearly 30%, with an estimated 10.5% having moderate to severe sleep apnea. Today, the individuals with sleep apnea that is moderate to severe are considered valid reasons to disqualify an individual for a CDL.

CDL Regulations

A CDL requires the applicant to submit to a physical exam, which includes review of respiratory dysfunction. Applicants are also screened for this disorder, which includes a Berlin questionnaire, BMI calculation and a clinical evaluation. The factors that lead to disqualification for a CDL are: being the driver in a crash that was attributed to the driver falling asleep at the wheel, having a BMI in excess of 33 kg/m2, having an AHI of 20 or higher with no treatment scheduled or not yet having been evaluated after a surgery was performed for the condition.

Response to Sleep Deprived Driving by the Government

Many governments have tried to reduce the incidence of sleep deprived driving by a variety of methods. These include rumble strips, educational messages and other programs such as Australiaâ€™s Driver Reviver.

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