

Fatigue



Driver fatigue is one of the three big killers on NSW roads. Fatigue does not only relate to extreme exhaustion but includes everyday mental or physical tiredness that affects your ability to function – even brief lapses in concentration can have serious consequences.

Being tired can affect your driving by reducing concentration and alertness to dangers as well as slowing your reaction times. It can also cause a microsleep – where you briefly fall asleep unintentionally. If this happens while driving, it can cost you your life.

The facts



- Each year, around 67 people die and around 645 are seriously injured in fatigue-related crashes in NSW.
- Being awake for about 17 hours has a similar effect on performance as having a blood alcohol content of 0.05.
- Fatigue-related crashes are almost three times as likely to be fatal than any other crashes.
- During a four-second microsleep, a car travelling at 100km/h will travel 111 metres while completely out of the driver's control.

Everyone can be affected by fatigue

Fatigue can affect your driving on any journey, any time, whether it's a just a short trip, or a longer one. It's important to think about how tired you are before driving, recognise the early warning signs when driving and know what to do to avoid driving tired. Factors that may increase fatigue include:

> Lack of sleep or poor sleep

Both the quality and the length of sleep are important. Your quality of sleep could be affected by:

- work (for example, shift work, hours of work, number of breaks)
- medical conditions (for example, insomnia)
- family responsibilities (for example, a new baby)
- environmental conditions (for example, exposure to heat, cold, noise or vibration)
- an overly active brain causing a restless night

> Sleep debt

Most people need about eight hours of quality sleep per night to function effectively. When we reduce the amount we sleep at night, we start to accumulate a 'sleep debt' – the difference between what we need and what we get.

The larger the sleep debt, the stronger the tendency to fall asleep, including when you are driving.

> The amount of time spent driving

Long hours behind the wheel will lead to physical and mental fatigue.

> Repetition

The risk of fatigue-related crashes is particularly high on long stretches of straight road.

> Driving when your body wants to sleep

Your body is programmed to sleep at particular times. Driving during hours when your body naturally wants to sleep are the riskiest times. This includes at night and early in the morning.

> Waking up tired

This is most dangerous for people who drive in the early morning hours, particularly shortly after waking from sleep. It is the feeling of grogginess you experience after waking. It can affect your ability to perform even simple tasks. It is usually reversed within 15 minutes of waking by activity and noise. However, it can last up to four hours and its severity depends on how much sleep you had and at what stage of the sleep cycle you awoke.

> Individual characteristics

Our age, general health, physical condition and lifestyle also influence how fast we become tired and how well we manage fatigue.

Watch for the warning signs of fatigue

You should stop driving if you are experiencing:

- excessive yawning
- poor concentration
- sore/tired eyes
- restlessness
- drowsiness
- slow reactions
- oversteering

More information

Visit the Transport for NSW road safety website (roadsafety.transport.nsw.gov.au/stayingsafe/fatigue) for information on driver fatigue and other important road safety topics. Visit Live Traffic NSW (livetraffic.com) for a map of rest areas in NSW.

If you're driving for work, visit the Towards Zero website (towardszero.nsw.gov.au/workplace) to complete the Road safety: Everybody's business online learning course to learn about road safety risk and how you can stay safe on NSW roads.

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How can I stay safe?

Before you drive, make sure you:

- Get a good night's sleep.
- Assess your tiredness before you drive. Visit testyourtiredself.com.au.
- Know what the early warning signs of fatigue are.
- When you are fatigued or in doubt, avoid driving altogether. Take public transport, a taxi, rideshare or ask a friend to drive you.
- Where possible, avoid driving at night when your body will naturally want to sleep.
- Find out if any medicine you are taking may affect your driving.
- Factor in time for rest breaks when planning your trip.
- Share the driving with another person where possible.
- If driving for work, let your manager know if you feel too tired to drive.
- Where possible, avoid scheduling meetings or appointments that you must travel to either too early or too late in the day when you may be tired.
- Avoid long drives after work, or other physically or mentally draining activities.

If you feel tired when driving, make sure you:

- Pull over for a break in a safe place (for example, a service station or rest area).
- Pull over for a nap – 20 minutes works best.
- Stop for a coffee if you are on a short drive (note that the effects of caffeine won't help for long and won't work for everyone).
- Swap drivers if you can.

