

Drowsy Driving and Shift Work Disorder
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Every time you get in your car or truck you share the road with people on their way to work and on their way home from work. They may have just completed a 12 hour shift or perhaps worked a double shift in order to support themselves or send a child to college. Ours is a 24/7 society where the demand for second or third shift workers as well as the economic pressures to work more hours has created a dangerous circumstance of drowsy driving on our roads and highways.

You may have heard the statistics from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration: 100,000 car crashes, 71,000 injuries and 1,550 fatalities each year are attributable to drowsy driving.

In our own communities, we are frequently made aware of public and commercial transportation accidents that have been found to be due to sleepiness.

This past October, the National Transportation Safety Board released the accident brief of the Metro-North train derailment in the Bronx that occurred on December 1, 2013, injuring 61 people and claiming the lives of 4 people on board. The train derailed when it came into a sharp turn with a speed limit of 30mph at a speed of 82mph and derailed without the application of the braking system. The NTSB concluded that the Engineer suffered from excessive sleepiness both from untreated sleep apnea and shift work sleep disorder. His work shift had changed to 12 hours earlier 2 weeks before the accident and he had found the adjustment difficult.

Shift workers are particularly at risk for drowsy driving. Irregular sleep times and circadian rhythm disruption often leads to difficulty falling asleep, poor quality sleep and early awakenings. Shortened sleep duration results from insufficient time between shifts, competing demands between work and personal lives and economic pressures to work extra shifts or second jobs.

Studies that compare performance after being kept awake for long hours or after consuming alcohol have shown that being awake for 17hours is similar to a blood alcohol level of 0.05%. Being awake for 24 hours is similar to a blood alcohol level of 0.1%. The legal limit for driving drunk is a blood alcohol level of 0.08%.

If you are a Shift-worker there are ways to cope with demands placed on you by our 24/7 society but ultimately it is up to each one of us to drive safely on the roads and highways we all share. Safety begins with enough good quality sleep, at least 6-8 hours a day, avoiding frequently rotating shifts, long commutes and extended hours. Seek help from your Primary Care Provider or a Sleep Specialist if you cannot manage the sleepiness that may result from a nontraditional work schedule.

Arrive Alive and please don't Drive Drowsy!