

FATIGUE CAN BE FATAL

By Jay Woodward

How many times have you caught yourself staring fixedly at the road ahead, hypnotized by the monotony of the highway? You suddenly realize that you have passed your turn off – totally inattentive.

Good drivers who spend long hours on the road realize that fatigue can be fatal. Extreme fatigue attacks a driver's mental ability and muscular coordination. Fatigue hampers a driver's ability to judge distances, speed, or driving conditions. These circumstances can lead to a serious accident.

Many times fatigue may also produce a mental state which will deceive drivers into believing that they are capable of driving safely. When tired, drivers often imagine conditions that do not exist. A reaction to some imaginary condition may be disastrous. The Federal Bureau of Motor Carrier Safety states that, "No driver should operate a motor vehicle, and a motor carrier should not require or permit a driver to operate a motor vehicle, while the driver's ability or alertness is so impaired, or so likely to become impaired, through fatigue, as to make it unsafe to operate the motor vehicle." In fact, the Bureau has established definite time periods for maximum driving. Why have these regulations been established? Experts have concluded that driver performance deteriorates, driver alertness diminishes, and accident probability increases as driving time increases. The frequency of accidents dramatically increases after about 7 hours of driving time.

All drivers should be aware of the signs of fatigue so that they may take measures to combat it.

While you are still alert, you will sit relatively quiet in your seat. As you begin to tire, you become restless, squirm in your seat, stretch, rub your eyes, and maybe start to crack your knuckles. A driver may experience short lapses of attention, but as fatigue sets in, you pay less and less attention to the instrument panel and the rear and side view mirrors. A driver may even stare fixedly ahead, actually appearing to be in a trance. It is, at this point, that the driving patterns change. There is less steering, irregular or erratic speed changes, weaving back and forth, and finally, crossing the center line or drifting off the road entirely. This is the time when a fatigued driver is a hazard to himself, as well as others.

Here are some of the precautions you can take to combat fatigue:

1. A driver should not operate a vehicle when tired, ill, or when any other condition makes his driving ability less than 100%.

2. A driver should not operate a vehicle beyond the hours of service limitations developed by the Bureau of Motor Carrier Safety.
3. Frequent rest stops should be made.
4. Any activity which substitutes a different physical act for the monotony of driving helps refresh a driver.
5. If available, a drink of coffee or water is often enough to increase alertness.
6. Fatigue comes on very quickly. Drivers should get off the road before they fall asleep instead of afterwards. A driver who is dog-tired should pull well off the road and take an extended rest break.
7. Do not use alcohol or drugs of any kind at any time.

Many drivers feel that drugs can increase alertness and efficiency so that they can operate a vehicle beyond their limitations. Drugs may increase alertness for a short period. However, their use is often followed by headaches, dizziness, agitation or irritability, decreased power of concentration, and marked fatigue.

An important factor to note is that the use of drugs can interfere with the body's normal warning symptoms of drowsiness and fatigue. Drivers can use up their body energy without realizing it until they may suddenly collapse.

They are given a false sense of self-confidence and do not realize that their driving ability and alertness are decreasing.