

Sleep Apnea

A study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania and sponsored by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) and the American Transportation Research Institute of the American Trucking Associations found that almost one-third (28 percent) of commercial truck drivers have mild to severe sleep apnea.¹

What is Sleep Apnea?

Sleep apnea is a breathing-related sleep disorder that causes brief interruptions of breathing during sleep. These pauses in breathing can last at least 10 seconds or more and can occur up to 400 times a night. Sleep apnea is a serious, potentially life-threatening condition that often goes unrecognized and undiagnosed.

Risk Factors for Sleep Apnea

Sleep apnea occurs in all age groups and both sexes, but there are a number of factors that may put you at higher risk:

- A family history of sleep apnea
- Having a small upper airway
- Being overweight
- Having a recessed chin, small jaw, or a large overbite
- A large neck size (17 inches or greater for men, 16 inches or greater for women)
- Smoking and alcohol use
- Being age 40 or older
- Ethnicity

Symptoms of Sleep Apnea

- Loud snoring
- Morning headaches and nausea
- Gasping or choking while sleeping
- Loss of sex drive/impotence
- Excessive daytime sleepiness
- Irritability and/or feelings of depression
- Disturbed sleep
- Concentration and memory problems
- Frequent nighttime urination

Diagnosing Sleep Apnea

In order to diagnose sleep apnea, your doctor may send you to a sleep center for testing. You may be asked to spend a night at the center, where experts will monitor your sleep.

How Can Sleep Apnea Affect Your Driving?

Because sleep apnea affects your sleep, it also affects your daytime alertness and performance. Untreated sleep apnea can make it difficult for you to stay awake, focus your eyes, and react quickly while driving. In general, studies show that people with untreated sleep apnea have an increased risk of being involved in a fatigue-related motor vehicle crash.

Many sleep apnea patients say they never fall asleep while driving. That may be true. But remember, you don't have to fall asleep to have a crash. You simply have to be inattentive or less alert — and with untreated sleep apnea; you are not as sharp as you should be.

Can You Still Drive if You Have Sleep Apnea?

Yes! While FMCSA regulations do not specifically address sleep apnea, they do prescribe that a person with a medical history or clinical diagnosis of any condition likely to interfere with their ability to drive safely cannot be medically qualified to operate a commercial motor vehicle (CMV) in interstate commerce.

However, once successfully treated, a driver may regain their “medically-qualified-to-drive” status. It is important to note that most cases of sleep apnea can be treated successfully.

Because each State sets its own medical standards for driving a CMV in intrastate commerce, check with your local Department of Motor Vehicles for regulations in your State.

What Should You Do Once You Learn You Have Sleep Apnea?

You and/or your doctor should contact the medical qualifying examiner to determine your fitness to operate a commercial motor vehicle and to get help with treatment.

What Level of Sleep Apnea (mild, moderate, severe) Disqualifies a CMV Driver?

The disqualifying level of sleep apnea is moderate to severe, which interferes with safe driving. The medical examiner must qualify and determine a driver’s medical fitness for duty.

What are the Obligations of a Motor Carrier Regarding Employees with Sleep Apnea?

A motor carrier may not require or permit a driver to operate a CMV if the driver has a condition — including sleep apnea — that would affect his or her ability to safely operate the vehicle.

It is critical that persons with sleep apnea fully use the treatment provided by their doctor. They should not drive if they are not being treated. Being effectively treated, and complying with that treatment, offers the best hope of a commercial driver with sleep apnea to secure the ability to do his or her job safely and be fully alert.

Reference

1. Pack A.I., Dinges D.F, & Maislin G. (2002). A study of prevalence of sleep apnea among commercial truck drivers (Report No. DOT-RT-02-030). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Transportation, FMCSA.

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