Drowsy driving is a serious public health concern which is often difficult for individual drivers to identify. While it is important for drivers to understand the causes of drowsy driving, there is still insufficient scientific knowledge and public education to prevent drowsy driving. As a result, the AASM is calling upon institutions and policy makers to increase public awareness and improve education on the issue, so our society can better recognize and prevent drowsy driving. The AASM has adopted a position statement to educate both healthcare providers and the general public about drowsy driving risks and countermeasures.

Keywords: drowsy driving, sleep deprivation, undiagnosed sleep disorders


The American Academy of Sleep Medicine:
• Believes that an awake and alert driver makes the roadways safer.
• Believes that every driver has a responsibility to be awake and alert when operating a motor vehicle.
• Supports the collaboration of sleep physicians, state departments of motor vehicles and licensing, highway patrol, the insurance industry, and legislative and regulatory bodies in the development and implementation of policies and procedures that reduce drowsy driving.
• Supports the inclusion of drowsy driving educational material and content in state’s drivers manuals, drivers education curricula, and drivers licensing examinations.
• Supports the automobile insurance industry in the development of drowsy driving educational discount programs.
• Supports the automobile manufacturing industry in the development of technology to mitigate the effects of drowsy driving.
• Supports the U.S. Department of Transportation in building infrastructure to reduce and mitigate drowsy driving.
• Believes that any individual who has difficulty staying awake while driving, despite adequate sleep, should be evaluated and, when appropriate, treated by a physician for a sleep disorder.

To avoid drowsy driving, it is important to understand what causes it. Healthy sleep requires adequate duration and quality, appropriate timing and regularity, and the absence of sleep disturbance or disorders. Both long-term and short-term sleep deprivation can cause drowsy driving. The average adult needs 7 or more hours of sleep per night, and failing to get enough sleep on a regular basis can result in excessive sleepiness behind the wheel. Even if you are sleeping for at least 7 hours per night, an undiagnosed sleep disorder will result in poor sleep quality and can cause drowsy driving. Non-traditional work schedules (e.g., shift-work) can disrupt and shorten sleep time because it is difficult for many shift workers to sleep in the daytime instead of the night. Using sleeping pills or other sedatives prior to sleep can result in residual sleepiness the following day and cause drowsy driving. Driving for long distances, extended periods of time, or driving late at night can increase the chances of become drowsy while driving. All of these factors have a cumulative effect on drowsy driving; the more risk factors you have, the worse your driving performance likely will be due to drowsiness.

Regardless of the cause of drowsy driving, everyone should be aware of the symptoms which include:
• Frequent yawning or difficulty keeping your eyes open
• "Nodding off" or having trouble keeping your head up
• Inability to remember driving the last few miles
• Missing road signs or turns
• Difficulty maintaining your speed
• Drifting out of your lane

If you find yourself becoming drowsy while driving, you should pull off the road and rest until you no longer feel sleepy. Consumption of caffeinated beverages can temporarily increase alertness while driving but are not a substitute for adequate sleep. Turning up the radio, opening the window, and turning up the air conditioner are not effective techniques for staying awake while driving. Get plenty of sleep before driving long distances. If you are planning a long trip and know that you might be tired, use a designated driver or alternate drivers, rather than risk driving while drowsy.

Preventing drowsy driving starts with individual drivers, but must be a priority for both public and private institutions. The AASM encourages more research that better defines indicators of drowsy driving, identifies the threshold at which sleepiness while driving becomes dangerous, and provides the public with simple methods to determine when they might be too tired to drive safely. Young men aged 16–24 are most at risk of getting into an accident while driving drowsy; therefore, educational efforts to reduce drowsy driving should include this age group. Private companies should educate their employees on the dangers of driving while drowsy, especially within the transportation industry or when long work hours or shift work is prevalent to the industry. These companies should work to prevent excessive sleepiness in their employees and employ fatigue management strategies to reduce drowsy driving risk.

Drowsy driving has gained attention over the last few years in the eyes of the public and the government; however, there is still a lack of scientific knowledge and public education necessary to prevent drowsy driving. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine calls on institutions and policy makers to raise public awareness and improve education in order to better recognize and prevent drowsy driving.

REFERENCES

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