A wake up call for drowsy drivers [1]

Dear Alice,

What causes people to fall asleep in cars even when they are driving and not sleepy?

Answer

Dear Reader,

You're driving down the interstate late at night (though not always at night), cruise control on, radio playing softly, and the steady thump of the tires on the pavement echoing the beat of your heart. Burr-UMP... Burr-UMP... Burr-UMP. A conditioned response from babyhood may kick in, where one finds the car warm and safe, and the motion soothing. It's enough to send the most chronic insomniac off to dreamland.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration [2], drowsy driving is responsible for more than 100,000 collisions and over 1,000 deaths every year. Lack of sleep affects driving in ways similar to alcohol: both can lead to slower reaction times; impaired coordination, judgment, and vigilance; and increased aggressiveness. Some warning signs that your drowsiness may be affecting the way you drive are:

- Inability to focus or keep your eyes open and head raised
- Repeated yawning
- Difficulty remembering the last few miles you traveled or the exit you planned to take
- Hitting the shoulder rumble strip, tailgating, or drifting out of your lane

Risk factors for being in a drowsy driving crash include:

- **Night time driving**: Most drowsy driving crashes happen between midnight and 6 A.M.
- **Sleep deprivation**: Fatigue can develop from sleep problems, working double or late-night shifts, or simply doing too much work with not enough rest.
- **Medication that has sedative effects**: Some medicines, such as antihistamines, antidepressants, or prescription painkillers, can cause unexpected bouts of sleepiness.
- **Untreated sleep disorders**: Sleep disorders, such as sleep apnea and narcolepsy, can lead to sleep-related crashes.

Young drivers are also more likely to be in drowsy driving crashes, perhaps because they are more likely to drive late at night, or have so many work, school, and/or social commitments that sleep time suffers. If you tend to get sleepy when you ride in cars, it's important to be
extra aware of these risk factors so that you can be sure you're safe to drive. (For more info on sleep and sleep problems, check out the Sleep [3] section of the Go Ask Alice! General Health [4] archive).

Despite popular misconceptions, driving with the radio pounding at your eardrums, stopping to exercise, and opening the windows to let a blast of wind blow you awake have NOT been shown to increase driver attentiveness. Caffeine can make you more alert, but it takes about 30 minutes to kick in and wears off after a few hours. Excess amounts of caffeine can also contribute to sleep problems. It may help to look for a safe place to pull over and take a short nap (with the doors locked), but more than 20 or 30 minutes sleep can leave you feeling drowsier than before. Better yet, if you’re able, consider finding a place to get a full night’s rest. In short, the best bet is to make sure you snooze before you cruise.

Alice!
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