

3.4 The need for sleep

All people have an irresistible need to sleep, with the urge to sleep greatest during the night and early morning when most people would normally be sleeping. Six hours sleep a night is the usual minimum. However, people differ in the amount of sleep they need and their tolerance levels may also vary if they don't get enough sleep.

Poor sleep, such as sleeping in a moving vehicle or having a small amount of sleep over several days, leads to severe sleep debt and the irresistible urge to sleep. This increases the risk of falling asleep while driving.

There are early warning signs when a person is sleepy and these warning signs should not be ignored when driving. Drivers have a limited ability to predict when they will fall asleep and by continuing to drive when sleepy, they place themselves and others at great risk of a serious crash.

Sleep indicators include:

- a drowsy feeling;
- blurred vision;
- difficulty keeping eyes open;
- head nodding;
- excessive yawning; and
- repeatedly drifting out of lane.

Fatigue indicators include:

- not feeling refreshed after sleep;
- a greater tendency to fall asleep while at work;
- more frequent naps during leisure hours;
- feelings of sleepiness;
- extended sleep during days off; and
- increased errors and loss of concentration at work.

Using the radio or airconditioning to stimulate alertness has limited effect and will not overcome tiredness. Substances such as stimulant drugs will provide a boost but do not reduce the need for sleep. Sleep that is delayed will need to be made up later.

The risk of fatigue is reduced when work schedules provide for sufficient good quality sleep. The most beneficial sleep is a good night's sleep of **at least** six hours, taken in a single continuous period. The restorative effects are less if the sleep is split between day and night time. Some people experience excessive sleepiness during the day, despite an apparently adequate length of sleep. This suggests the presence of a sleep-related disorder that may require medical attention.

3.5 Working at night

Many commercial vehicle drivers work at night and, in particular, during the hours between midnight and 6am. They are either doing shifts or have schedules that require travel at night. Working at night elevates the risk of fatigue because it combines the daily low point of alertness with the increased likelihood of reduced amounts of sleep.

Night workers are six times more likely to have a crash than day workers. The risk of an accident increases with the number of nights worked, with a 45 per cent increase by the fourth night and 90 per cent by the seventh night.

People who work at night have trouble adjusting their body clocks. No matter how much sleep a person has beforehand, he or she will feel sleepy between 1:00am and 6:00am.

17 hours awake leads to performance similar to that of a person with a blood alcohol content of 0.05 per cent.

20-25 hours awake leads to performance similar to a blood alcohol content level of 0.1 per cent.

Regular night workers can make some adjustment to their body clock that enables them to sleep during the day. This is rarely a complete readjustment however and on average night workers get around two hours less daily sleep than day workers. Apart from the effect of the body clock, their sleep is also more prone to disturbance. When they go back to being “day” people on their days off, they also find that their body clock resets itself to the normal day-night schedule. With both the quality and duration of sleep being affected, sleep deficit and fatigue can accumulate.

Driving at night on regional roads in Western Australia further increases the risk of a fatigue-related crash. The limited visibility, low levels of lighting, and generally reduced levels of sensory stimulation combined with higher speeds increase the likelihood of a road crash.

- Where possible schedules should be adjusted to reduce night driving.
- Drivers and others in the workplace should be informed of the dangers and the warning signs associated with fatigue at night.
- Information should be provided on how best to cope with night work by changing and improving the environment for work and sleep both on the road and at home.
- Drivers coming off night shift should also have the opportunity to recover any sleep loss before returning to work. There should be at least 24 hours off between shift changes to prepare for the new day or night shift regime.