

A Wake-Up Call to Sleepy Workers

Did you know that lack of sleep can be deadly? The loss of sleep can often be related to several issues, but the various causes of sleepiness can have a cumulative effect. Any combination of these causes can greatly increase one's risk for a fatigue-related workplace accident or an automobile accident. The cause of sleepiness is most often related to undiagnosed or untreated sleep disorders, but there are other causes that are less often thought about. These include sleep loss from restriction or too little sleep, interrupted or fragmented sleep, chronic sleep debt, circadian rhythm factors associated with driving patterns, work schedules, time spent on a task, using sedating medications and consuming alcohol when one is already tired.

Loss of sleep leads to daytime fatigue and poor functioning during the day. Fatigue has a great impact not only in our workplace, but also in our daily lives. The impact of fatigue leads to impaired reaction time, poor judgment and decision making, problems with information processing and short-term memory, decreased performance, vigilance and motivation and increased moodiness and aggressive behaviors. Many hours of productivity are lost at work because of a chronically-sleepy population.

All of us are at risk for daytime fatigue and sleepiness since we require adequate sleep in order to function at peak. Once we succumb to fatigue, we are at greater risk of having a microsleep—an unintentional episode of sleep that usually lasts 2-3 seconds but can last up to 30 seconds or more. The most frightening thing about microsleep is that it can occur without your knowledge. Only a few seconds of sleep is sufficient time for you to fall asleep at your desk, run off the road while driving or drift into another lane.

The population at greatest risk for fatigue and chronic sleep deprivation is those with undiagnosed and untreated sleep disorders like obstructive sleep apnea. Other at-risk populations include young people under the age of 25, shift workers—particularly those working the night shift, and people who work long hours. Commercial drivers (especially long-haul drivers) and business travelers who spend time driving or flying across time zones may be jet-lagged and have a greater tendency to fall asleep at inappropriate times.

Several tragedies and work-place accidents have been related to chronic fatigue and sleepiness—the Exxon Valdez accident, Three-Mile Island Accident, the ConAir Plane Crash

and the Continental Connection Crash near Buffalo, New York in 2009 when pilot error led to the death of 50 people. Later investigations by the NTSB concluded that the pilots' performance was likely impaired because of fatigue. On the day of the flight, the captain commuted hundreds of miles and the first officer commuted from the other side of the country prior to reporting for duty. The NTSB concluded that both pilots used an inappropriate facility during their last rest period before the accident flight.

New Jersey was the first state to enact a law (Maggie's Law) that addresses drowsy driving.

The law was enacted in memory of 20-year-old Maggie McDonnell who was killed by a driver who fell asleep while driving and hit Maggie's car head-on. The driver admitted that he had been awake for 30 hours and had been using drugs. Maggie's Law states that a sleep-deprived driver qualifies as a reckless driver who can be convicted of vehicular homicide. Several states now have similar laws in which drowsy driving can be a criminal offense. Driving drowsy also significantly increases the legal risks employers face from extended hours of operation.

March 7-13 is National Sleep Awareness Week. Make a commitment to getting enough sleep at all times, but use this week to really focus on what you need to do to get the sleep you need.

- Use the bedroom for sleep and sex only—no watching TV or having laptops in bed
- Avoid driving long distances when you would normally be asleep
- Avoid alcohol and medications that could make you drowsy when you are at work or when you need to drive
- Avoid caffeine at night
- If you are sleeping at night but tired during the day, consult your Physician

Have a sleep study if you snore and have high blood pressure, morning headaches, or excessive daytime sleepiness despite sleeping your typical hours or if you have any unusual nighttime behaviors while asleep, as noted by a bed partner .

Marietta Bibbs, BA, RPSGT, Sleep & Neurodiagnostics Morton Plant Mease Healthcare, Safety Harbor, FL