



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

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Fatigue and the Transit Driver

by Pat Weaver



Avoiding fatigue is far more preferable than looking for strategies to deal with it once it occurs.

It is one of the most unnerving experiences that can happen when driving a transit bus: You got up early this morning to take three passengers to doctor's appointments at the medical center 75 miles away. The sun is coming up over the horizon and is getting in your eyes. It's a little warm in the bus, and the passengers aren't talking much, mostly dozing as they bounce along in their seats.

You've been on the road about 30 minutes. The highway is long, smooth and monotonous. You didn't get a lot of sleep last night. You worked late and when you got home you just couldn't fall asleep until about 2:30 in the

Fatigue behind the wheel is a very real danger, even if you've never experienced it firsthand. Here are some tips for staying awake while you're driving:

- An obvious cause of fatigue is lack of sleep. If you haven't received seven or eight hours of sleep the night before, you're courting fatigue. Get enough rest. Driving is hard work, and you need to be fresh and alert to perform your job safely. If you know you're too tired to drive, treat it just as if you were sick; you are not fit for duty in this condition.
- Avoid being scheduled for early morning shifts just after driving a late evening or night shift. If you are transporting passengers across state lines or live in a state that regulates hours of service for intrastate transportation, you may have hours of service restrictions. Be sure that, at a minimum, you comply with these requirements. Kansas does not have hours of service limitations for intrastate public transportation, so your minimum standard will be set by your agency policy.
- When driving into the early morning sun, be sure to wear a good pair of sunglasses to protect your eyes and avoid the need to squint or close your eyes to avoid discomfort.
- Adjust your vehicle's environment so that it helps keep you awake and alert. Keep the temperature cool with air conditioning in the summer and frugal amounts of heat in the winter.
- Do not use cruise control; keep your body involved with the driving.
- Watch your posture. Drive with your head up and your shoulders back. Tuck your buttocks against the seat back. Legs should not be fully extended, but flexed at about a 45 degree angle.
- • Take frequent breaks. Stop periodically in a safe place (gas station, convenience store or rest stop, for example) to allow yourself and passengers a chance to get out and stretch. Exercise fights fatigue. Stop long enough to make sure you're not too drowsy to continue. If drowsiness occurs on an in-town route, ask your supervisor for a 15 minute break between passengers to allow you to refresh yourself. If that's not enough then you may need to consider asking to be relieved for the day. It may be an inconvenient request, but avoiding inconvenience is no justification for risking an accident because of fatigue.

morning. The radio isn't holding your attention, and neither is the driving. You stare straight at the miles of road ahead. You start to feel your shoulders sag, and your eyes slowly... start... to... close.

You hear a shout. Abruptly, you open your eyes, jerk up in your seat. You've started to drift out of your lane and a little off the road, enough that a passenger noticed and yelled out in time. You steer your vehicle back into the lane, take a few deep breaths, and realize, fearfully, what just happened. You were asleep, and a tragedy was narrowly averted.



If you go to bed late and wake up early to an alarm clock, you are probably building a sleep debt.

Fatigue on the road can be a killer. It happens frequently on long drives or when other conditions (like inadequate rest the night before) are present. Some of the warning signs were probably there: back tension, burning eyes, shallow breathing, inattentiveness, and any kind of erratic driving, such as drifting, abnormal speed, tailgating, or failure to obey traffic signs.

Thirty-seven percent of drivers have nodded off for at least a moment or fallen asleep while driving at least once in their driving career. Eight percent have done so in the past six months. While there are no good statistics on the number of transit drivers who have dozed off while driving, the potential is always there if you don't take adequate precautions.

The consequences for a drowsy transit driver are tremendous. Falling

asleep with passengers on the vehicle could lead to injury or death of you as the driver, one or more passengers, or others in your path. It might lead to substantial property loss for your agency. And finally, just one report of your nodding off at the wheel, even if no accident occurs, could mean the loss of your job.

One cause of fatigue is alcohol consumption. Alcohol is a depressant, and a driver doesn't have to be drunk to fall asleep at the wheel. Even one drink can be enough to induce fatigue. Another cause can be prescription or over-the-counter medications. Just because the medications are legal doesn't mean that taking them is safe to do so when driving a vehicle.

Another culprit is the nature of modern highway driving. Most vehicle interiors have a comfortable driver's seat in a reasonably temperature-regulated environment. Many vehicles have "cruise control." Most major roads have been engineered to eliminate

sharp curves, hills and bumps. Ironically, these designs for comfort contribute to falling asleep at the wheel. And, if your passengers are sleeping during an early morning or late night trip, there won't even be talking to help keep you alert.

Dull landscapes, the droning of tires and engines, and the repetitive patterns of oncoming headlights, trees, poles and highway center lines can lead to a dangerous, trance-like state known as "highway hypnosis," which deadens drivers' senses and slows their reaction time.

What can you do? First, take a few moments to complete the driver fatigue quiz on next page 3. Next, read the tips at right for staying awake while you are on the road. Driver fatigue is a serious issue, and deserves your serious attention.

Source: Adapted with permission from the National Safety Council, *Driver Fatigue Fact Sheet*, April 13, 2004, <http://www.nsc.org>.

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Driver fatigue quiz

It's important to know whether or not the information you have about sleep and sleep debt is accurate. Knowing about sleep debt may save lives. The following are some statements about sleep and sleep debt. Circle the answer you think is the most correct.

1. Coffee overcomes the effects of drowsiness while driving. (T or F)
2. I can tell when I'm going to go to sleep. (T or F)
3. Rolling down my window or singing along with the radio will keep me awake. (T or F)
4. I'm a safe driver so it doesn't matter if I'm sleepy. (T or F)
5. You can stockpile sleep on the weekends. (T or F)
6. Most adults need at least seven hours of sleep each night. (T or F)
7. Being sleepy makes you misperceive things. (T or F)
8. Young people need less sleep. (T or F)
9. Wandering, disconnected thoughts are a warning sign of driver fatigue. (T or F)
10. Seeing little green men in the middle of the road may mean I am too tired to drive. (T or F)
11. On a long trip, a driver should never take a break but try to arrive at the destination as quickly as possible. (T or F)
12. A micro-sleep lasts four or five seconds. (T or F)

Answers:

1. FALSE. Stimulants are no substitute for sleep. Drinks containing caffeine, such as coffee or cola, can help you feel more alert, but the effects last only for a short time. 2. FALSE. Sleep is not voluntary. If you're drowsy, you can fall asleep and never even know it. You cannot tell how long you've been asleep. 3. FALSE. An open window or the radio has no lasting effect on a person's ability to stay awake. 4. FALSE. The only safe driver is an alert driver. Even the safest drivers become confused and use poor judgment when they are sleepy. 5. FALSE. Sleep is not money. You can't save it up ahead of time and you can't borrow it. But, just as with money, you can go into debt. 6. TRUE. The average person needs seven or eight hours of sleep a night. If you go to bed late and wake up early to an alarm clock, you are probably building a sleep debt. 7. TRUE. One of the warning signs of a drowsy driver is misjudging surroundings. 8. FALSE. Young people need more sleep than adults. Males under 25 are at the greatest risk of falling asleep. Half of the victims of fatigue-related crashes are under 25. 9. TRUE. If you are driving and your thoughts begin to wander, it is time to pull over and take a break. 10. TRUE. Seeing things that are not there is a good indication it is time to stop driving and take a rest. 11. FALSE. Driving, especially for long distances, reveals a driver's true level of sleepiness. To be safe, drivers should take a break every three hours. 12. TRUE. During a "micro-sleep" of four or five seconds, a car can travel 100 yards, plenty of time to cause a serious crash.

How many did you get right? How many did you miss? Remember, knowing the truth about driver fatigue—and acting on it—may save your life, the lives of your passenger or those of drivers and pedestrians around you.

Source: Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, <http://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/safetyprogs/fatigue/fatiguequiz.htm>.