

# Fatigue Best Practice Guide

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## Stay Alert to Driver Fatigue

Driver fatigue is a major contributor to collisions and is a part of the Triple Threat (along with Speeding and Distraction) that is a factor in the majority of incidents on the road. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control estimates that over a million drivers fall asleep at the wheel each month, contributing to injuries and fatalities that could be avoided with proactive steps.

Fatigue is far more than just feeling tired, however; it undermines critical brain functions essential for safe driving, affecting the ability to make quick decisions, maintain focus, and accurately assess risk – often without obvious warning. Fatigue can lead to micro-sleep – very brief episodes of unconsciousness that can last several seconds – during which you are effectively “unaware” while your eyes remain open. Even these short lapses can result in missing road signs, failing to respond to sudden hazards, or drifting into other lanes, with potentially devastating consequences. Because these effects can be subtle, many drivers underestimate how dangerous fatigue truly is.

Recognizing and respecting the progressive impact of fatigue on your driving performance is vital to preventing collisions and ensuring your safety as well as that of others on the road. Fatigue reduces not only physical reaction times but also mental vigilance – compromising your ability to interpret complex traffic situations or sudden changes in road conditions.

### Tips to Stay Vigilant:

- **Make sure you are well-rested and able to focus as part of your pre-trip routine.**
- **Routinely self-assess your alertness level, particularly during long stretches or late-night drives, to catch early signs of fatigue before they escalate.**
- **When possible, share driving duties with another competent driver to break long periods of continuous driving.**
- **Make use of driver assistance technologies such as lane-keeping assist and fatigue detection systems where available to support your vigilance, but do not rely solely on them. Remember, it is YOUR responsibility to stay aware of hazards to help keep everyone safe.**
- **Keep your environment stimulating – adjust music or engage in light conversation, if safe.**

## Prioritize Your Sleep

### Sleep is the Cornerstone of Safe Driving

Sleep is not an optional luxury — it is a fundamental biological need that restores both mental and physical capacities. Chronic sleep deprivation impairs concentration, slows reaction times, increases irritability, and compromises decision-making.

“Sleep debt”, or chronic lack of proper, restful sleep, builds up over days or weeks and cannot be “paid off” with one extended rest period. Scientific consensus recommends adults aim for 7 to 9 hours of consistent, quality sleep nightly for optimal function. Without this, your ability to remain alert, process information, and react appropriately behind the wheel significantly decreases, increasing crash risk.

Beyond quantity, the quality of sleep matters — interruptions and fragmented sleep can leave you feeling groggy and unrested. Consistent sleep helps regulate mood and cognitive functions critical for sustained attention, making it the foundation of all fatigue prevention efforts.

### Tips for Better Sleep:

- **Maintain a consistent sleep and wake schedule — even on weekends — to help regulate your circadian rhythm and improve sleep quality.**
- **Establish calming pre-sleep routines such as reading or gentle stretching to signal your body that it's time to wind down.**
- **Avoid caffeine, nicotine, and heavy meals at least a few hours before bedtime because they can disrupt the natural onset of sleep.**
- **Create a sleep environment that is dark, quiet, and cool to promote deeper, uninterrupted rest. Blackout curtains and white noise machines can help.**
- **Limit exposure to screens and blue light before bed to help your brain prepare for restorative sleep.**



## Understanding High-Risk Hours

### Work With Your Body's Natural Rhythms

Your body operates on circadian rhythms – internal biological clocks that regulate periods of alertness and fatigue throughout the day. Regardless of how well-rested you are, there are predictable windows when your risk of drowsiness spikes dramatically.

These dips in alertness typically include the early morning hours from 12 a.m.–6 a.m. (0:00–06:00) and the mid-afternoon slump from 2 p.m.–4 p.m. (14:00–16:00). During these times, natural dips in body temperature and hormonal shifts reduce your alertness, making you more vulnerable to lapses in attention and delayed reactions. Driving during these circadian low points without extra caution raises collision risk.

Understanding your body's natural rhythms allows you to plan driving schedules that avoid these high-risk windows or at least prepare for them with additional breaks or rest.

### Tips for Managing High-Risk Hours:

- **Whenever possible, schedule driving outside these vulnerable periods to maximize alertness and safety.**
- **If driving during these times is unavoidable, plan additional breaks to combat increased sleepiness.**
- **Utilize short power naps before embarking on a trip during circadian lows to boost alertness, if possible.**
- **Avoid heavy meals, sedating medications, or alcohol before or during these vulnerable hours to reduce compounded fatigue.**
- **Consider caffeine strategically prior to driving during these times but do not rely on it alone.**



## Hours-of-Service

### Understand Hours-of-Service Regulations for Your Vehicle

One of the leading causes of roadway incidents involving commercial vehicles is driver fatigue. To mitigate this risk, follow Hours-of-Service (HOS) regulations. These regulations are designed to ensure commercial drivers have adequate rest periods to help reduce the chances of fatigue-related errors.

Driving while exhausted not only puts the driver at risk but also endangers other road users. Below are practical tips for staying compliant with HOS rules and avoiding fatigue:

- **Plan your schedule thoughtfully:** Before starting your trip, use route-planning tools to identify rest stops or safe parking areas to align with HOS limitations.
- **Take regular breaks:** Follow mandated rest periods and use these breaks effectively to rest, hydrate, and rejuvenate.
- **Log your hours accurately:** Whether you are using electronic logging devices (ELDs) or paper logs, ensure your driving hours and rest periods are recorded correctly to avoid any violations.
- **Prioritize sleep during rest periods:** Use your off-duty time effectively to get adequate, quality sleep in a comfortable environment to prevent fatigue.
- **Monitor your alertness levels:** Pay close attention to how you feel during your shift. If you sense fatigue setting in, stop driving and take a rest. Do not push beyond your physical limits.
- **Avoid stimulant dependence:** While caffeine or energy drinks might temporarily help with alertness, they are not a substitute for genuine rest. Overreliance might lead to crashes when the effects wear off.
- **Educate yourself about HOS rules:** Stay updated on HOS regulations, including recent changes, to avoid inadvertent violations.



## Assess Your Lifestyle

### Recognize How Daily Demands Influence Fatigue

Fatigue rarely results solely from inadequate sleep duration.

It often arises from a combination of lifestyle factors that negatively affect your energy and sleep quality. Long or irregular work shifts can disrupt normal sleep cycles. Family responsibilities, especially involving young children or dependent adults, can also fragment rest and increase stress levels.

Social or evening commitments may encroach on necessary sleep time. Chronic stress, physical exhaustion, and even some medications can undermine sleep's restorative effects, causing you to feel persistently tired despite seemingly sufficient rest.

Understanding how these factors interplay enables you to make lifestyle adjustments that support sustained alertness and overall well-being. This holistic approach is key to managing fatigue beyond just "getting enough sleep."



### Tips for Lifestyle Management:

- **Develop a routine that balances work, family, and rest, allowing for sufficient downtime and mental recovery.**
- **Incorporate stress management techniques such as mindfulness, meditation, regular exercise, or hobbies that promote relaxation.**
- **Communicate your need for rest and support to family members and employers to create a more fatigue-aware environment.**
- **Regularly review your health and medications with a healthcare professional to identify factors that may contribute to tiredness. Additionally, always check with your doctor about potential side effects when adding new medications.**
- **Avoid multitasking when possible – focus on one task at a time to reduce mental fatigue accumulation.**

## Recognize the Warning Signs

### Listen to Your Body's Fatigue Signals

Fatigue rarely strikes without warning. Early symptoms include yawning, frequent blinking, and difficulty focusing. More severe signs include missing exits, forgetting portions of your drive, driving at inconsistent speeds, and drifting lanes.

These symptoms indicate your brain's decreasing ability to maintain alertness and control over the vehicle. Ignoring or dismissing these warning signs increases the risk of collisions dramatically. Responding promptly to fatigue cues is critical to staying safe.

Your body provides these signals to protect you; paying attention and reacting early can prevent tragedies.

### Tips for Early Detection:

- **Monitor your own physical signs** — yawning and experiencing heavy eyelids are early red flags.
- **Encourage passengers to watch for your fatigue signs and speak up if they become concerned.**
- **Take immediate action** — such as a rest break or nap — when any warning signs appear.
- **Trust your intuition; if you feel less focused or drowsy, do not hesitate to stop.**
- **Use apps or devices designed to alert drivers when signs of fatigue are detected.**



## Take Regular Breaks

### Rest Breaks Are Essential Safety Interventions

Driving continuously for extended periods tires both your mind and body. Physical stiffness develops, circulation slows, and the mental monotony dulls your focus.

Regularly planned breaks — ideally every two hours for at least 15 minutes — are proven to restore alertness, reduce fatigue, and prevent errors. Even short pauses to stand, stretch, and breathe fresh air can re-energize you, making your driving safer and more controlled.

Strategic rest breaks not only prevent physical discomfort but also re-activate cognitive alertness and reaction speed.

#### Tips for Effective Breaks:

- Aim for breaks at least every two hours during long drives, even if you do not feel tired yet.
- Use breaks to get fresh air, move your body, and stretch muscles to improve circulation and reduce stiffness.
- Drink water and have light snacks during breaks to maintain steady hydration and energy levels.
- Avoid screens during breaks to rest your eyes and mind from stimulation.
- Plan your routes with scheduled stops at safe, well-lit areas for breaks.



## Take Action at the First Sign of Sleepiness

### Early Intervention Saves Lives

Pushing through fatigue is a common but dangerous mistake. Once symptoms of drowsiness appear – frequent blinking, yawning, head nodding, difficulty concentrating – your driving performance is already compromised.

Stopping at the first sign of sleepiness, even if it interrupts your schedule, is the safest choice. A short stop to rest or a nap of 15–20 minutes can restore alertness, especially when followed by light physical activity. Waiting too long to rest increases the risk of severe incidents.

Proactive rest reflects responsible driving and respect for everyone's safety on the road.

### Tips for Immediate Action:

- **Familiarize yourself with safe places to stop and rest along your route before you start driving.**
- **Constantly self-monitor for fatigue and do not ignore subtle signs.**
- **Avoid stopping in unsafe or unauthorized locations – choose well-lit, secure areas.**
- **Inform someone if you plan to stop for rest to ensure safety and accountability.**



## Do Not Rely on Quick Fixes

### Temporary Stimuli Are No Substitute for Sleep

Many drivers turn to quick fixes — cold air, loud music, caffeine — to combat tiredness. While these methods might temporarily boost alertness, they do not reverse the underlying cognitive impairment caused by fatigue.

These tactics can create a false sense of security, encouraging drivers to continue when they should rest. The only effective remedy for fatigue is actual sleep, which restores brain function and physical coordination.

Understanding the limitations of quick fixes helps prevent dangerous overconfidence.



### Tips to Avoid False Confidence:

- **View caffeine and other stimulants as short-term aids, never as replacements for proper rest.**
- **Recognize that caffeine takes 15–30 minutes to take effect, and its benefits diminish after a few hours.**
- **Combine quick fixes with scheduled breaks and naps for safer fatigue management.**
- **Be wary of overstimulation tactics such as loud music or extreme temperature changes that may cause distraction and only offer temporary relief.**
- **Educate yourself and others on the real risks of relying solely on temporary alertness boosters.**
- **If you ever have trouble concentrating, pull over to a safe, legal place to rest and reset before you resume your drive.**

# Avoid Impairing Substances Before Driving

## Understand the Hidden Risks Behind the Wheel

Driving requires constant alertness, quick reaction time, and full control over decision-making. Substances that alter brain function — whether alcohol, recreational drugs, or legal medications — can compromise these abilities, often in ways drivers don't immediately recognize. Even when used in small amounts or according to prescription, these substances can impair judgment and responsiveness, especially when combined with fatigue or stress.

Unlike distractions that may come and go, substance impairment lingers. Alcohol and many drugs (including sedatives, painkillers, and antihistamines) slow the central nervous system, increasing drowsiness and making it more difficult to process information or respond to sudden changes in traffic. Some effects, such as reduced coordination or mental fog, can persist for hours — even into the next day.

## Medications: The Overlooked Risk

Prescription and over-the-counter medications are often underestimated in terms of driving risk. Many contain ingredients that cause drowsiness or delayed reaction times. These effects may not be obvious at first but can still put drivers in a compromised state, particularly when combined with sleep deprivation, illness, or unfamiliarity with the medication.

Recognizing how different substances affect your driving ability is essential to making safe decisions. When in doubt, opt for alternative transportation or delay driving until you're confident in your ability to stay fully alert.

## Tips to Avoid Impairment Behind the Wheel

- **Avoid Alcohol Before Driving:** Even one drink can reduce alertness. Plan for a safe ride if you've consumed any amount of alcohol, and avoid drinking the night before early-morning driving.
- **Understand Medication Side Effects:** Always check labels and ask your pharmacist or doctor whether a medication could impact alertness or coordination.
- **Be Cautious with New Medications:** When starting a new medication, avoid driving until you understand how it affects your mental and physical state.
- **Don't Mix Medications or Substances with Fatigue:** Even safe medications can compound tiredness and reduce driving safety when you're already sleep-deprived.
- **Track and Communicate Medication Use:** Maintain a list of what you're taking and share it with family, coworkers, or supervisors if your role includes driving responsibilities.
- **If You Feel Unfit to Drive, Don't:** Trust your instincts — if you feel "off," foggy, or drowsy, reschedule your trip or seek alternative transport.

**Making conscious choices about what you consume — and when — is an essential part of staying safe on the road. Impairment doesn't always look like intoxication, but its consequences can be just as serious.**

## **Fatigue Is a Safety Risk – But It’s One We Can Manage**

Driver fatigue doesn't arrive with a warning light. It builds quietly, influenced by lifestyle, health, and day-to-day decisions that often go unnoticed. But its impact can be sudden – and devastating. The good news is that fatigue-related crashes are among the most preventable. Through consistent habits, self-awareness, and a willingness to pause before pushing through, every driver has the power to reduce risk. Staying alert is about more than getting rest – it's about valuing your well-being, protecting others on the road, and recognizing that your choices matter. By prioritizing rest, planning smarter, and knowing the signs before it's too late, you help ensure every trip ends safely.

