

“Fatigue & Driving: A Dangerous Combination”
SAFETY SHARE
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Hazard

There are more than 10,000,000 motor vehicle accidents in the United States annually. On average, these accidents account for a minimum of 2.5 million injuries and nearly 40,000 deaths. This translates to a staggering 110 fatalities everyday – one person being killed every 14 minutes. A significant percentage of these accidents are attributed to impaired drivers, which in addition to drugs and alcohol includes individuals suffering from sleep deprivation and mental fatigue. (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration & U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstracts).

Discussion

It is not uncommon for most of us in the mining industry to work long hours, commute great distances, and/or travel in inclement weather and at night. While it’s difficult to determine statistically, it has long been suspected that vehicle accidents associated with commuting are the single largest hazard facing both professionals and hourly employees in the mining industry.

From a physiological perspective, mental fatigue and drowsiness are very different but can result in the same catastrophic situation when you’re behind the wheel of car or truck. Mental fatigue is generally considered a symptom of some type of affliction, and is caused, among other things by stress, boredom, depression, jet lag, and sleep disorders. Mental fatigue often manifests itself as a decreased level of consciousness and/or decline of mental acuity. In some cases, a person may experience “micro-sleep” which is similar to dozing off, with common durations of fractions of a second up to ½ minute. Drowsiness, on the other hand, is the body’s natural response to the lack of sleep. It can be caused by either acute or chronic conditions and can be influenced by a variety of health issues and diet. Everybody possesses different thresholds on the amount of sleep they require, as well as how they react to different types of stimulants like caffeine in coffee and soda. That said, over a sustained period of time, when you’re tired, there is no substitute for actual sleep.

Best Practices

- If a person shows signs of mental fatigue or is constantly tired over an extended period of time, it is important that the individual seek professional medical attention to identify possible causes, which can include cancer, diabetes, and a host of other serious conditions.
- While driving, if you begin to feel drowsy or tired, the best practice is to immediately switch positions with another person or find a safe location in which to park and take a nap. Getting out of the vehicle and walking around, drinking caffeinated beverages, and/or rolling down you window are simply temporary measures to a bigger problem. The only true solution is sleep.
- If a nap is insufficient, find a hotel or safe location for an extended period of time in which to sleep.

