

Safety Alert - #11-17-2005



Re: Exhausted or Drunk – Makes no Difference!

Our society considers it unacceptable to operate a motor vehicle while under the influence of alcohol. In Alberta, the legal limit for blood alcohol concentration (BAC) is .08 percent. At this level, drivers are considered to be impaired. Thinking and reflexes slow down, judgment may be impaired, speech may slur, and there may be problems with memory. Individuals in this condition must not operate equipment, nor should they be permitted to drive a motor vehicle.

A 1999 study by Australian researchers on the effects of lack of sleep on human performance may force us to look at worker fatigue in the same way. Since fatigue or tiredness is so difficult to measure, the researchers compared impairment due to sleep deprivation with alcohol-induced impairment. While the laboratory setting may not always reflect the “real world”, the results may surprise you.

Subjects were kept awake and asked to perform four tasks hourly. After 20 hours, the subjects were judged in the areas of sustained grammatical reasoning and vigilance (watchfulness) tests. Findings suggest that after 20 hours of sustained wakefulness, a functionally impaired person may be as functionally impaired as someone with a BAC of .10 percent. That’s a level of alcohol intoxication greater than the BAC level (.08) legally permitted in Alberta.

The results of this study support the suggestion that moderate levels of sustained wakefulness reduce performance to an extent greater than is currently acceptable for alcohol intoxication. The results are also important for anyone working extended hours over multiple days or weeks with inadequate periods of rest. Since sleep debt is cumulative, we can expect to see similar performance impairments in workers fatigued due to a lack of sleep.

Driving and Fatigue

If you experience any of these symptoms while driving, take them as a warning that you could fall asleep without meaning to.

- Your eyes close or go out of focus by themselves.
- You have trouble keeping your head up.
- You can't stop yawning.
- You have wandering, disconnected thoughts.
- You don't remember driving the last few miles.
- You drift between lanes, tailgate or miss traffic signs.
- You keep jerking the car back into the lane.
- You have drifted off the road and narrowly missed crashing.

If you exhibit even one of these symptoms, you may be in danger of falling asleep. Pull off the road and take a nap.

Only a few seconds?

A “microsleep”, one of those naps lasting four or five seconds, is long enough for you to travel more than the length of a football field at highway speeds.

Taking more risks?

Fatigue causes some people to take more risks as they try to avoid additional effort.

Other signs

Lost for words? Sleep loss means you may have difficulty finding the words for what you want to say. Uh ...uh ... mmm

Be Safe!

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