

# AAA Says 2-of-5 Drivers Admit Nodding Off at the Wheel

Drowsy Drivers Caused 17% of Fatal Accidents from 1999-2008.



6 comments

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A new study from AAA has revealed that [driving while drowsy](#) is more common and more deadly than previously thought.

The [AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety](#) analyzed the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's](#) crash data from 1999-2008 and estimated that nearly 17 percent of fatal crashes -- 4,400 deadly accidents a year -- are the result of [sleepy drivers](#).

In addition, a recent study by AAA foundation found that 41 percent of drivers said they'd [fallen asleep at the wheel](#), with 1-in-10 admitting to having done so in the last year.

"Just like alcohol and drugs, being very tired while you're driving decreases your awareness," said Peter Kissinger, the foundation's president and CEO. "It slows your reaction time and it impairs your judgment."

Results from the foundation's study coincide with the start of Drowsy Driving Prevention Week by the National Sleep Foundation, which has been pushing for better drowsy-driving awareness and education since 1991.

Staying awake for 24 hours can leave a person as impaired as someone with a 0.1 alcohol level -- the equivalent of consuming six drinks. Twenty-five percent of drivers surveyed said they have driven in the last month despite being so tired that they couldn't keep their eyes open.

According to Dr. Michael Lacey, the medical director of the Atlanta Sleep Medicine Clinic, fatigue can have a real impact on the brain. When the body expects to sleep, it releases chemicals like melatonin and when a person is forced to stay awake, the work the brain is doing to fight those chemicals leaves them in a fog.

"The bottom line is that people think they can handle it," said Dr. Robert Basner. "They are actually not handling it well and fatal accidents do occur."

Basner said that when a drowsy person drives, they cannot maintain alertness, their coordination is off and their judgment suffers.

### **Drowsy Driver: 'I Freaked Out Pretty Bad'**

Two years ago, Alex Noel was returning from a high school dance after midnight when he nodded off on a dark country road.

"The only thing I was thinking was, you know, I am really tired right now but (the fatigue) wasn't telling me to get off the road," said Noel. "It was telling me I need to get home. I need to go to bed."

When he finally awoke, Noel flipped his truck. "There's a ditch to my right side," he said. "My instinct is to freak out and that's exactly what happened. I freaked out pretty bad."

"The dashboard was in my lap. The steering wheel was between my legs and I was sort of sitting on it," Noel said. "My two lower legs were underneath the seat and like I said, my left arm was crumpled up in front of me."

Noel emerged from the accident with a broken shoulder blade, bruised lung and nerve damage.

### **Tips on Avoiding Drowsiness**

AAA shared these tips on remaining alert:

- Get at least six hours of sleep the night before a long trip.

Travel at times when you are normally awake.

- Take a break every two hours or 100 miles.

- Drink a caffeinated beverage. While you wait for the caffeine to take effect -- usually 30 minutes --get some shut-eye.

- Travel with a passenger who's awake.