

# Driving and your health - Think about it!



## Fact Sheet No.2: Sleep Disorders and Driving



### 1. What are Sleep Disorders?

As the name suggests sleep disorders are health problems relating to sleep. This is different from being tired or suffering from fatigue due to poor sleeping habits or busy work schedules. However the results in terms of road safety are similar.

There are many different types of sleep disorders including **sleep apnoea** (choking or difficulty breathing during sleep), **insomnia** (difficulty falling staying asleep) and **narcolepsy** (falling asleep suddenly at inappropriate times).

**Around 1 in 4 men over the age of 30 have some form of a sleep disorder.**

Falling asleep during the day can be a sign that you have sleep disorder.

### 2. How do sleep disorders affect driving?

***Sleepiness due to any reason is a major cause of road crashes.***

Sleep apnoea, for example, has been shown to increase road crashes by five to seven fold.

***The effect on driving is similar to that seen with blood alcohol levels over 0.05.***

### 3. Can you still drive with a sleep disorder?

Sleep disorders can be effectively treated so in most cases a **conditional licence** can be issued.

This means you can continue to drive provided that you have the treatment that is prescribed for you, see your doctor as required and that daytime sleepiness is no longer a problem. It may be that the doctor recommends you not to drive initially while your condition is being investigated and while effective treatment is started.

### 4. How do you know if you have a sleep disorder?

Often if you have a sleep disorder your spouse or partner may be the first to notice that you choke, gasp, gurgle or struggle to breathe, and are restless during the night. Other signs that you may have a sleep disorder include:








- ☐ broken and unrefreshing sleep;
- ☐ morning headaches;
- ☐ tendency to doze or fall asleep inappropriately eg whilst driving;
- ☐ feeling tired despite adequate time in bed;
- ☐ reduced sexual activity;
- ☐ heartburn at night;
- ☐ poor memory and concentration;
- ☐ insomnia;
- ☐ having more than 5 to 15 interruptions an hour when trying to sleep; or
- ☐ snoring.

**If you have any of these symptoms or experiences it is important to talk to your doctor.**

## 5. Do lifestyle factors affect sleep disorders?

Lifestyle factors do contribute to sleep disorders so **there is a lot you can do to reduce your risk**. Attention to these factors is also important if you have a sleep disorder already.

Changes you can make to reduce your risk on the road include:

-  **Lose excess weight** - this is probably the most important step you can take towards prevention (see Fact Sheet 6, *Healthy Food Choices* and Fact Sheet 7, *Be Active Every Day* for more information). Losing weight is also important for treating sleep apnoea.
-  Where possible, **have a regular sleep pattern** - aim for 7-8 hours sleep between 10pm and 8am.
-  **Quit (heavy) smoking** - smoking irritates the nasal lining and affects breathing.
-  **Look after your mental health** – learn how to relax and develop strategies to cope with stress (see Fact Sheet 9, *Mental Fitness* for more information).
-  **Avoid taking drugs, particularly speed and tranquilisers** as they disrupt sleep patterns. (See Information Supplement on *The Effects of Drugs* for more information).
-  **Avoid alcohol, especially in the evening** - alcohol affects the muscles in the throat, which can lead to frequent sleep interruptions.
-  **Stop driving if you are sleepy** – take a power nap (10-45 mins).

***This resource has been produced with input from the Australasian Sleep Association.***



## 6. Do driving patterns affect sleep disorders?

Driving patterns (as well as lifestyle factors) do contribute to sleep disorders. So there are changes you can make to reduce your risk. These include:

- avoiding driving at times when you are normally asleep;
- allowing adequate time for sleep (7-8 hours most nights);
- avoiding driving after having missed a large part of your normal sleep; and
- avoiding driving if sleepy (take a nap when you feel sleepy).



## 7. For more information

Contact:

- Your local doctor about a referral to a sleep specialist.
- The Lung Foundation about information on sleep disorders – they have a range of fact sheets and booklets 1800 654 301, [www.lungnet.org.au](http://www.lungnet.org.au).
- Refer to the Information Supplement on *Obstructive Sleep Apnoea* (on the NTC website [www.ntc.gov.au](http://www.ntc.gov.au)).

**For more information see [www.ntc.gov.au](http://www.ntc.gov.au)**

**Looking after your health is like looking after your vehicle - regular care and maintenance pays off in the long run**

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