

Teens Can't Cheat Sleep: Survey Shows Teens Reporting Less Than Eight Hours of Sleep Are Twice as L

by NAMIC

Teens who get less than eight hours of sleep per night on average are twice as likely to say they have fallen asleep at the wheel (20 percent) than are teens who report getting an average of eight or more hours of sleep per night (10 percent), according to a new Liberty Mutual Insurance and Students Against Destructive Decisions survey. The national survey of 3,580 students in grades 10, 11, and 12 also found that 36 percent of teens often drive to school in the morning when drowsy.

"The new survey reminds teens and parents that road safety begins with a good night's sleep," said Dave Melton, director of Transportation Technical Consulting Services at the Liberty Mutual Research Institute for Safety in Hopkinton, Mass.

Melton said the survey findings are significant, given that 82 percent of teen drivers report that their main reason for driving is to get to school.

"As parents we tend to equate safe teen driving with sober driving, but fatigue should be an equal cause for concern," said Melton. "Together we need to raise awareness of the risk factors and symptoms of drowsy driving in our communities and schools to ensure our children are getting the rest they need and provide them with the tools to know what to do if they are on the road and tired."

The survey also provided a broad view of teen driving habits and the factors that are likely to affect whether a teen driver falls asleep at the wheel. For example:

Teen boys (29 percent) are more likely than teen girls (24 percent) to say they feel safe driving alone when they are tired; yet teen boys (20 percent) are more likely than teen girls (11 percent) to fall asleep at the wheel.

Teens who have had a license for less than a year are more likely to fall asleep in the morning (31 percent); the reverse is true for more experienced teen drivers, as 55 percent of teens who have been licensed for more than a year say they are most likely to fall asleep at the wheel late at night.

Myths and facts about drowsy driving

Drowsy driving causes more than 10,000 crashes each year, leading to 40,000 injuries and 1,550 deaths, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Yet, of additional concern, the Liberty Mutual/SADD survey found an overwhelming number of teen drivers often rely on other mostly ineffective activities - some even distracting or dangerous - to help combat symptoms of drowsiness, including:

Playing loud music (49 percent)

Talking with passengers (45 percent)

Rolling down the window (27 percent)

Talking on their cell phone (22 percent)

Drinking energy drinks (19 percent)

Drinking coffee (14 percent)

Speeding (11 percent)

Text messaging (11 percent)

Of all of these choices, the National Sleep Foundation considers only caffeine - such as coffee or energy drinks - as a possible countermeasure to avoid falling asleep at the wheel. However, while the equivalent of two cups of coffee can increase alertness for several hours, it should not be relied on to overcome sleep deprivation.

"We know these methods are not reliable for teens or adults," adds Melton. "Sleep loss or fatigue impairs driving skills such as hand-eye coordination, reaction time, vision, awareness of surroundings, and judgment." Indeed, the National Sleep Foundation says drowsy driving can be just as dangerous as impaired driving. Unlike an impaired driver, a person who falls asleep while driving has no control of the vehicle and cannot take any measures to avoid a crash. The combination of sleepiness, inexperience, and lifestyle choices including tendencies to drive at night and in the early morning hours puts young adults at risk for drowsy-driving crashes.

Prevention is key

Sufficient sleep is the best antidote to drowsy driving. The National Sleep Foundation recommends that teens should be getting between 8.5 and 9.5 hours of sleep to be fully rested, but because of classes, after school activities, and social lives most teens are getting much less. The Liberty Mutual/SADD study found that teens get an average of 7.4 hours of sleep per night, the least amount (7.2 hours on average) coming on school nights (Sunday through Thursday).

"Unfortunately, 'early to bed, early to rise' doesn't sync well with suddenly nocturnal teens who are balancing late nights, early mornings, and jam-packed schedules," said Stephen Wallace, SADD chairman/CEO. "They want to do it all, but our job is to help them regulate competing demands in a way that ensures they get the sleep they need to be safe behind the wheel."

The National Sleep Foundation also supports these tips to help combat drowsy driving:

Allow time for breaks on long trips - about every 100 miles or two hours

Use the buddy system - ask your passenger to stay awake during the drive to help keep you awake and to share the driving responsibilities.

If sleepiness sets in while driving, prevent a crash by pulling over to find a safe place to take a nap or sleep for the night.

Source: Liberty Mutual/SADD

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