

Risk Management Guidelines

Driver Fatigue

Introduction

There is no doubt that fatigue (physical and mental tiredness) is a major cause of serious accidents - sleep related accidents tend to be more severe, possibly because the driver is unable to take any avoiding action, or even brake, prior to collision.

Independent studies from Loughborough University and the Transport Research Laboratory (TRL) show that fatigue was a key factor in at least 1 in 10 of all accidents and over 20% of motorway accidents.

As such there are several thousand casualties each year in accidents caused by drivers falling asleep at the wheel, indeed fatigue would seem to be responsible for claiming more lives on our roads than alcohol.

Employers should consider controls for all employees who drive on business, particularly those not directly covered by rules on drivers' hours (for car drivers in particular) by controlling and recording working hours and rest. This should be done in reference to the Working Time Directive.

Guidelines should be introduced for:

Fitness to drive

Avoidance of long journeys after periods without adequate sleep or after a full day's work and of journeys during the night

Ensure the vehicle is appropriate for the person/journeys being undertaken

Journeys' being planned to allow sufficient breaks e.g. at least 15 minutes every two hours.

Drivers feeling sleepy to stop in a safe place and take a suitable nap and / or refreshments.

Overnight accommodation where appropriate to enable the driver to remain unaffected by tiredness.

At Risk Drivers

Any driver travelling long distances or when they are tired is at risk of a sleep-related accident. In particular, young male drivers (18 to 30 years of age) truck drivers, company car drivers and shift workers are most at risk of falling asleep while driving.

Sleep Apnoea Sufferers

Sleep Apnoea sufferers are particularly at risk, as this is a condition, which is likely to cause excessive daytime drowsiness.

Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA) is a medical condition that causes difficulties in breathing during sleep. Typical symptoms are gagging or choking sounds followed by very loud snoring sleep. You may be suffering from sleep apnoea and be unaware of the problem, as you seem to sleep on through the night. But because you stop breathing many times during sleep this causes considerable sleep disturbance. The result is that the next day you find yourself nodding off, due to the very poor quality sleep you had the night before. OSA is a problem mainly suffered by men, aged over 50. Key indicators are a large collar size and obesity. There are devices now available that can quickly help the problem

Risk Management Guidelines

if it is diagnosed. Often it is the partner of a sufferer who is the first to know.

Danger times

The early hours of the morning and the middle of the afternoon are the peak times for fatigue accidents. Also, long journeys on monotonous roads, particularly motorways, show an increased propensity for a driver to fall asleep.

One of the times when individual drivers may drive in the early hours of the morning is when they are catching, or returning from, an early flight or ship/ferry journey.

Drivers returning from long haul flights, or coming off ships and ferries also often drive home after having had very little sleep in the previous 24 hours. Remember that these problems may be exacerbated at these times by the effects of alcohol, which of course should be avoided for at least a day prior to undertaking any journey of consequence.

Risk Management Guidelines

The Law

It is not a specific offence to drive when tired, however a driver is more likely to commit a driving offence whilst tired. This may be as significant as causing death by dangerous driving and there have been a number of successful convictions of drivers' who fell asleep at the wheel.

Enforcement and Testing

It can be difficult for the Police to detect a fatigue-impaired driver. However, some Police Forces are currently trialling general impairment roadside tests, which may prove effective in detecting sleepy drivers, as well as drivers affected by alcohol, drugs or medicines.

Drivers Hours/Working Time Rules

On 1st August 2003 the "horizontal" directive 2000/34/EC came into force in the UK and brought the road transport sector in scope of the main 1998 Working Time Regulations. This applied all of the conditions of the regulations to non-mobile workers and applied certain aspects of the regulations to "mobile workers".

In essence this imposes a 48-hour average working week with no opt-out available. In addition there is a cap of 60 hours working time in any one-week and a maximum of 10 hours work when working during the night.

The regulation and enforcement of driver hour's rules is obviously important for many reasons but in particular with regard to potential driver fatigue. These regulations have been extended to include drivers of all goods vehicles in excess of 3.5 tonnes but many drivers who drive for work (e.g. company car drivers) and who do very high mileages are not covered by these rules.

Minimising the risk

Most of the things that drivers do to try to keep themselves awake and alert when driving are ineffective, and should only be regarded as emergency measures to allow the driver time to find somewhere safe to stop.

Drinking at least 150 mg of caffeine and taking a "power nap" of around 15 minutes are the only measures that help to reduce sleepiness. But these are temporary measures; sleepiness will return if the driver does not stop driving within a fairly short period of time.

The safest option is for drivers to avoid driving when sleepy, when they would normally be sleeping or when they are ill or taking medication which contra-indicates driving or using machinery. It is crucial that drivers plan journeys, especially long ones involving driving on motorways or other monotonous roads.

Employers Should

Ensure shift patterns and route planning take into account the potential for driver fatigue. This should be embodied in company policy and procedures.

Be mindful that a drivers personal circumstances change over time. This will mean the potential for developing a problem with fatigue will also vary.

Include questions on their driver's pre-employment health questionnaire to ascertain whether or not they suffer from any sleep-related conditions/problems. Further investigation such as medical examination can be undertaken if it seems

Risk Management Guidelines

necessary from the information given in the questionnaire or interview.

Screen drivers as part of their overall risk assessment programme to manage potential high-risk exposures.

Decisions by an employer on unsuitability or suspension from driving on medical grounds require specialist advice, e.g. from a medical practitioner or occupational health specialist. Ethical considerations apply regarding the release to an employer of clinical details.

The Company has a duty to take account of an employee's medical state, for example where a medical condition may affect the health and safety of the employee or others.

Drivers should

Consult their doctor if they are having problems with sleep and/or to ascertain whether or not they are suffering from a specific sleep related problem. Also, their doctor will be able to advise them if in any doubt whether they should declare a medical condition.

Try to ensure they are well rested, and feeling fit and healthy (and not taking medication which contra-indicates using machinery), before starting long journeys

Plan the journey to include regular rest breaks (at least 15 minutes at least every two hours)

If necessary, plan an overnight stop

- Avoid setting out on a long drive after having worked a full day
- Avoid driving into the period when they would normally be falling asleep

- Avoid driving in the small hours (between 2am and 6am)
- Be extra careful when driving between 2pm and 4pm (especially after having eaten a meal or drunk any alcohol)
- If feeling sleepy during a journey, stop somewhere safe, take drinks containing caffeine and take a short nap.

Further Information:

Loughborough Sleep Research Centre

www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ssehs/research/centres-institutes/sleep

Freight Transport Association:

www.fta.co.uk

Transport Research Laboratory:

www.trl.co.uk

Awake Ltd:

www.awakeltd.info

My Sleep Programme:

www.mysleepprogramme.co.uk

Other RSA Risk Management Guidelines addressing a wide variety of risk control issues are freely available from www.rsabroker.com/risk-management

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