



Drowsy driving = deadly

Written by Elaine Bowers

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Sixteen-year-old Dylan West was a new driver on the summer day he set out to follow his mother's car on the way to an annual camping trip. Near Shelton, the Port Orchard teenager drifted off at the wheel and edged across the center lane into the path of an oncoming car. The terrible collision killed him instantly.

Drowsy driving is the leading cause of death for drivers between 15 and 24, according to studies by the National Sleep Foundation (NSF). The foundation reports that about 100,000 crashes are related to drowsy driving each year, and 55 per cent are caused by drivers younger than 25.

"It relates to driver inexperience," says Scott Walmsley, owner of Driver Education Services in Seattle. "When you're an inexperienced driver, it takes significantly more conscious effort, more mental effort than it does when driving becomes more intuitive.

"If you're tired or fatigued, it diminishes your capacity. And that's much, much worse for the inexperienced driver.

A chronic problem

The NSF poll found that drowsy driving is a chronic problem with teens. More than half (51 per cent) say they have driven drowsy in the past year, and 15 per cent of drivers in grades 10-12 say they drive drowsy at least once a week.

Chris Adamson, law enforcement officer and instructor at the 911 Driving School in Tacoma, says it's not unusual for an officer to think he's stopped someone for driving under the influence of alcohol, only to find that the driver is drowsy and nodding off.

"Driving drowsy exhibits the same effects as a DUI," Adamson says. "You're driving and you're not paying attention and you start to swerve. You lose your motor skills and your timing's off."

Information about drowsy driving is part of the 911 defensive driving course and the course for new drivers. "We tell (students) they're every bit as much at risk being drowsy as they are being drunk," Adamson says. And, he adds, they present just as much risk to other drivers.

Walmsley teaches his students techniques for staying awake. Rolling down the window, turning up the radio, or drinking caffeinated drinks are only temporary fixes, he says. The best strategy is to pull off the road and sleep for 10 or 15 minutes, no longer. "That way, you don't go into the sleep cycle," he says.

Getting enough sleep

Drowsy driving is perhaps the most dangerous manifestation of a broader problem, according to sleep experts. Most teenagers are walking around chronically sleep deprived.

Preetam Bandla, M.D., pediatric sleep medicine specialist with the Swedish Sleep Medicine Institute, says teenagers need between 9 and 9 1/2 hours of sleep per night -- and most aren't getting anything close to that.

"What happens is a natural shift in their circadian rhythms. Now their bodies are telling them not to fall asleep until 11 or 12. Then most of them need to get up at 6:00 or 6:30 for school. So most are getting about seven hours of sleep," he says.

There are things parents can do to help their teens get more sleep, but first they need to recognize the problem, Dr. Bandla says. The NSF poll showed that most students know they're not getting the sleep they need, but 90 per cent of the parents polled thought their teens were getting enough sleep at least a few nights a week.

"There is that perception because a lot of teenagers are sleeping in on weekends," Dr. Bandla says. "There is the perception that they're catching up. But sleeping in an hour or two is not nearly enough to catch up."

Mercer Island mom Marilyn Schulte says her 15-year-old son often sleeps until noon or 1:00 in the afternoon on weekends. "I kind-of let him go with that sleep, especially given the growth that kid's done in the last two years," she said.

Dr. Bandla says sleeping in for more than an hour or two on weekends can be a sign of sleep deprivation. Other clues include difficulty waking up in the morning, chronic oversleeping, falling asleep in school or in front of the television or declining school performance.

He urges parents to pay attention to their teen's mood "if they're often irritable and cranky but they wake up bright and perky after they've slept in on a weekend."

While recognition of the drowsy driving problem is important, the challenge lies in convincing a teenager to do something about it. Schulte acknowledges that getting enough sleep may be the last thing on a teenager's mind. "Their sleep patterns are so odd," she says. "They just don't want to miss anything by going to sleep."

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Resources

Dr. Preetam Bandla, pediatric sleep medicine specialist with the Swedish Sleep Medicine Institute, recommends these steps parents can take to help their teenagers get enough sleep:

- **Establish a routine.** Choose a reasonable bedtime (9:30 or 10 p.m.) and keep that schedule on weekends and weekdays. Sleeping in more than 45 minutes can be counterproductive because it makes sleep difficult that night.
- **Dim lights at night and provide natural light in the mornings.** This might be difficult in the Northwest, but Bandla suggests having the teen brush his teeth near a window when it's light, for example.
- **See that your teen gets plenty of exercise.** Regular activity can help with sleep patterns.
- **Provide a sleep environment that is calm, quiet, dark and comfortable.** Teens who have four or more electronic gadgets in their room are the most likely to get insufficient sleep, Bandla says. Turn off the computer and the television at least an hour before bedtime.
- **Help your teen avoid caffeine in colas and other beverages.** Caffeine can stay in the system for several hours and make sleep difficult.

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