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New study in the journal Sleep finds that sleepy driver near-misses may predict accident risks

WESTCHESTER, III. – Getting behind the wheel on an insufficient amount of sleep poses a significant risk to not only the driver, but to others sharing the road. Sleep deprivation may affect a driver's awareness of his or her surroundings, as well as reduce one's ability to react to situations in time. As a result, this endangers the lives of themselves – and others – by increasing the likelihood of causing an accident. In the first known scientific study into the important question of near-miss sleepy accidents and their association with actual accidents, a study published in the March 1st issue of the journal SLEEP finds that sleepy near-misses may be dangerous precursors to an actual accident.

The study focused on a study sample of 35,217 individuals. The results obtained showed that a total of 1.3 percent of all participants reported at least one accident associated with being sleepy over the preceding three years. Near-miss accidents associated with sleepiness were reported in 18.3 percent of the sample (10.6 percent with one sleepy near-miss, 5.9 percent with two-to-three sleepy near misses and 1.8 percent with four or more sleepy near-misses).

"Little attention has been given to sleepy near-miss driving accidents up to now despite their likely relationship with actual driving accidents," said Nelson B. Powell, DDS, MD, of Stanford University, one of the authors of the study. "Although there have been investigations that included near-miss accidents and/or sleepy near-misses, these data were limited and not used to predict a sleepy accident. This study indicates that near-miss sleepy accidents are common and dangerous. "The near-miss sleepy accidents occur in 14 times more people than actual sleepy accidents, and the near-misses appear to predict who is at risk for any type of actual accidents in a dose-response fashion."

Drowsy driving, the dangerous combination of sleepiness and driving, or driving while fatigued, while operating a motor vehicle, is becoming a growing problem in the United States.

In a sense, drowsy driving is similar to driving under the influence, as sleepiness results in a slower reaction time, decreased awareness, impaired judgment and an increased risk of getting involved in an accident, resulting in unnecessary deaths or injuries to innocent people. Nearly nine out of every ten police officers responding to an AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety Internet survey reported they had stopped a driver who they believed was drunk, but turned out to be drowsy. The survey was coordinated with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Sleep is an essential component of our everyday lives. When you sleep, your body recharges itself so that you wake up feeling refreshed. The amount of sleep you get affects everything else you do: how you think, how you feel, how you perform, and even how you drive.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM) offers the following tips for people to avoid sleepiness while driving:

- Get enough sleep

AASM recommends that adults get seven-to-eight hours of sleep each night in order to maintain good health and optimum performance.

- Take breaks while driving

If you become drowsy while driving, pull off to a rest area and take a short nap, preferably 15-20 minutes in length.

- Consume caffeine

Caffeine improves alertness in people who are fatigued.

- Do not drink alcohol

Alcohol can further impair a person's ability to stay awake and make good decisions. Taking the wheel after having just one glass of alcohol can affect your level of fatigue while driving.

- Do not drive late at night

Avoid driving after midnight, which is a natural period of sleepiness.

Those who think they might have a sleep disorder are urged to discuss their problem with their primary care physician, who will issue a referral to a sleep specialist.

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SLEEP is the official journal of the Associated Professional Sleep Societies, LLC, a joint venture of the AASM and the Sleep Research Society.

SleepEducation.com, a Web site maintained by the AASM, provides information about the various sleep disorders that exist, the forms of treatment available, recent news on the topic of sleep, sleep studies that have been conducted and a listing of sleep facilities.

For a copy of this study, entitled, "Sleepy Driver Near-Misses May Predict Accident Risks", or to arrange an interview with an AASM spokesperson regarding this study, please contact Jim Arcuri, public relations coordinator, at (708)492-0930, ext. 9317, or jarcuri@aasmnet.org.

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