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Thought Leadership: Sleep: the missing link in fighting fatigue

Combating fatigue is a major focus for transport operators and the transport industry. However, much of our response is about compliance with safety regulations. Is it time to reframe the issue, and instead focus on preventing fatigue by addressing its cause?

Whether we choose to take notice or not, we all know the importance of exercise and good nutrition to our health. The third pillar of strong physical and mental wellbeing, according to internationally renowned expert Dr Carmel Harrington, is sleep.

Sleep is critically important to short- and long-term health. In the short term, inadequate sleep increases your chances of succumbing to illness, such as flu infections. In the long term, it increases the risk of chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes and obesity and can shorten life expectancy.

As well as being linked to poor mental health and depression and affecting our mood, lack of sleep also has a potentially serious impact on safety in the workplace and on the road, with chronic sleep deprivation associated with slower thought processes, more errors and poor judgement and memory.

People with poor sleep are between two and seven times more likely to be involved in a motor vehicle accident, with around one in five accidents attributable to fatigue and daytime sleepiness.

Sleep tips – for home and away

Getting the recommended 7-9 hours sleep is a challenge in today's fast-paced world, with research indicating many of us only get an average of 6.5 hours sleep a night. So what chance do truck drivers and others whose work requires driving, particularly when long hours or periods away from home are involved, have of getting quality sleep?

The good news – particularly considering the potentially catastrophic impact of lack of sleep on someone behind the wheel – is you can take good sleep practices on the road with you.



The right conditioning

Adopting good sleeping habits and following a regular sleep routine, whether you are at home or away, is one key to managing sufficient quality sleep. This includes not eating or exercising for at least three hours before bedtime and switching off all technology at least an hour before sleep. Having a warm-hot shower just before bedtime encourages sleep and, if away, bringing something from home, such as your own pillow, is also a good idea.

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A regular routine conditions your body that is time for sleep. "If we have a routine that conditions us to fall asleep we should take it wherever we go, and it's really important that we do that because a strange environment with strange surroundings may stop us from getting to sleep," Carmel Harrington says.

Know your plan

Planning rest breaks is one thing the transport industry is good at, particularly for long haul drivers. When it comes to ensuring adequate sleep, that means ensuring you go to sleep early enough to get the sleep you need and planning the timing and type of meals to allow your body to digest food.

If, for example, you are planning to sleep at 10pm, dinner should be no later than 7pm and consist of food that is easier to digest, like fish, rather than a heavy meat dish. Long haul truck drivers should consider having their major meal in the middle of the day because it takes longer to digest food when you are sitting for long periods.

Power to the nap

Carmel Harrington also recommends stopping for a 20 minute power nap if drivers are feeling tired, particularly during the natural afternoon 'dip' in alertness, because the need to sleep, as she explains, is a combination of alertness level and sleep drive.

Sleep drive is created by the body producing a sleeping neurotransmitter, called Adenosine, which the body stops producing as soon as we sleep. Too much of this sleep chemical in your brain makes it difficult to stay awake and is the cause of 'microsleeps'. Drooping eyes and yawning are clear signs your body is fighting sleep.

"In that sort of circumstance, a 20 minute power nap can really help, because the best way to get rid of the

sleeping chemical is to pull over and sleep," Carmel says. "And if you only have 20 minutes, you're only sleeping lightly and you won't go into deep sleep, because that will make you quite groggy when you wake up. So set the alarm for 20 minutes and you'll feel refreshed." A 20 minute power nap however does not do away with or replace the need for the nightly sleep requirement of 7-9 hours.

Top sleep tips

- Maintain regular bed and waking times
- Avoid alcohol
- Avoid caffeinated beverages after noon
- Do not smoke before bedtime
- Exercise, but not within 3 hours of bedtime
- Finish eating 2-3 hours before bedtime
- Adopt a going-to-bed routine – 1 hour before bed turn off all technology and dim lighting
- Do not use the bed or bedroom for anything other than sleep and sexual activity

Treat sleep disorders

There are more than 70 sleep disorders that can seriously disrupt sleep and have long-term health effects.

Insomnia, or trouble falling or staying asleep, is the most common sleep disorder, affecting a third of adults at some stage. A similar percentage of men regularly snore.

In most cases snoring is not dangerous, however it is often an indicator of the more serious condition of sleep apnoea, especially if snoring is accompanied by episodes of non-breathing and gasping.

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Sleep apnoea is more common in truck drivers than the general population because the sedentary nature of the job means they are more likely to be overweight.

The most common type of sleep apnoea is obstructive sleep apnoea, which is characterised by repeated collapsing and reopening of the upper airway during sleep. This is what causes fatigue because, even though they may be getting sufficient hours of sleep, sleep apnoea sufferers are waking hundreds of times a night to open their airway.

“Some people sleep up to 10 hours and wake up feeling wretched because they haven’t really had any sleep at all. They’re waking up every minute to clear their airway and then they go back to sleep – we know this because when we do sleep studies we see it on their brainwaves during sleep,” Carmel Harrington says.

In addition to a much greater risk of motor vehicle accidents, sleep apnoea is linked to several serious conditions including high blood pressure, heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

If you snore, stop breathing in your sleep, have restless sleep or are always tired during the day, you may have sleep apnoea. Consult your doctor because sleep apnoea is treatable and treatment is effective in reducing the risks of accidents.

Transport companies are increasingly including screening drivers for sleep apnoea as part of workplace safety. This is important for both individual health and road safety, particularly with research in the US showing that treating all drivers suffering sleep apnoea would save \$11 billion in collision costs and almost 1000 lives a year.

Cause, not the symptom

The transport industry puts a lot of effort into managing fatigue, however it seems sometimes that is more about compliance than individual health. Sufficient quality sleep is essential for good mental and physical health and so, as Carmel Harrington suggests, perhaps the focus needs to be as much about sleep and health as fatigue and compliance.

“I think it’s important we start talking about sleep, not fatigue, because sleep is something we need to do for our health and not just for industry compliance,” she says. “If you understand that your weight issue or your type 2 diabetes issue or your heart issue is happening because of your lack of sleep, then maybe you’ll start paying attention to it for the sake of your own health rather than to satisfy compliance requirements.

“That’s why I want the conversation to be around sleep. We’ve now put fatigue in this bureaucratic box and have taken it away from us having a personal interest in it.”

We acknowledge the assistance of Dr Carmel Harrington in compiling this piece. For more information on sleeping well, visit: www.sleepforhealth.net.au/