

Narrator

We all love sleep but many of us would say we don't get enough. This leads to us feeling run-down and fatigued.

Fatigue is the state of being physically or mentally tired and is estimated to contribute to a significant number of crashes. It can make it hard to concentrate, slow our reaction time, and impair our judgement. So the last place we want to feel these effects is behind the wheel.

Fatigue can be caused by large amounts of time spent on the road, driving when you'd normally be sleeping, or exhaustion from a long day at school or work. It can also be influenced by characteristics such as age, physical condition, medical history, and the use of drugs, alcohol, and some medications.

Young drivers should be cautious about the build up of something called 'sleep debt'. If we get less than eight hours of sleep, we can build up a debt of the hours we miss.

So, if we only get five hours of sleep on a Monday night, we owe three hours of sleep. If we only get five hours of sleep the following night, the debt builds up and we owe even more sleep.

If you're driving, this can result in difficulty concentrating, slowed reaction time, grumpiness, and even something called a 'microsleep'.

This is where you can fall asleep without even realising it. You could drive for 100 metres with your eyes closed and not even notice.

Driving at night with a sleep debt is incredibly risky, and most people, particularly young adults, have a sleep debt. It's important to get good quality sleep so that we can stay focused on the road, especially at night.

Christopher

We all know what the signs of sleepiness are. We feel them. We yawn and we shift in our chair when we're tired. So if you're going on a long drive the next day, then obviously getting a good night's sleep the night before is the most important.

I think the next best thing is to be aware of your sleepiness and realise that you're not going to be functioning the best throughout the day. So it's about checking in with yourself and just being proactive with managing your sleepiness.

Narrator

Once you start feeling the effects of fatigue behind the wheel, it's important to know how to respond. Caffeine doesn't work, neither does loud music or turning on the air-conditioner. So what should we do before we take the wheel to stop fatigue from rearing its ugly head and if it does kick in while we're driving, what should we do once we spot the signs?

Christopher

When you're on the road, you can check in with yourself and say 'how fatigued or sleepy am I feeling'? That might begin with starting to yawn a little bit. I'm blinking a lot more slowly and a lot more frequently. Then it might progress to shifting in my chair a lot and reacting slowly to events.

So being aware of those signs of sleepiness can really affect your decision about when you should take a break because it is important to recognise them and ideally take a rest break or a nap break, which is even better. We know that having a nap break is the best way to get rid of or reduce your sleepiness — and putting the music on and winding down the window are just not that effective.

Narrator

So if you're feeling fatigued, is there an alternative to driving? Can you get a friend to drive you? Can you catch public transport? If not, can you postpone the journey until you're in a better state?

If you have to drive and know you have a fair distance to travel, plan your journey. Stop for at least 15 minutes every two hours.

Stop at a service station. You could fill up your car and call your parent or guardian to let them know you're safe while you're not behind the wheel.

Once you're back on the road, have a plan for when you're taking your next break — and never drive for more than 10 hours in a single day.

Christopher says it's also important to plan where to take your breaks. The side of a freeway is incredibly dangerous and isn't an option.

Christopher

There are over 400 rest breaks in Queensland. It's a big state but there are plenty of rest areas available if you plan your drive beforehand.

Narrator

Sleep is the only way to cope when you're feeling fatigued. If you start to feel fatigued while driving, you need to pull over and take a nap in a safe spot. It's the safest option for you and everyone else you share the road with.