

Sleep disorders reported as cause for numerous traffic accidents each year

Jen Hildebrand
Reporter

It is estimated that drivers who fall asleep behind the wheel cause thousands of traffic accidents in the United States each year. These drowsy drivers experience an excessive amount of fatigue and a high number of undiagnosed sleep disorders.

According to the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), there are 100,000 police-reported accidents each year. Approximately 1.5 percent of these accidents are caused by drowsiness. It is estimated that 1,500 fatalities and 71,000 injuries are a result of drowsy drivers each year.

Sleep-related crashes are most common among young people. According to a study conducted by the state of North Carolina, 55 percent of all crashes having to do with sleep involved people under 25. Seventy-eight percent of those surveyed were males, and the peak age when these accidents occurred was 20.

These accidents can be caused by excessive fatigue associated with shift changes, long drives without breaks and driving alone. These types of accidents can happen to anyone, but there may be stronger forces at work in some cases.

An estimated 30 million Americans are afflicted by sleep disorders that cause excessive daytime sleepiness. The most common sleep disorders chronic insomnia, sleep apnea and narcolepsy, and all are easily diagnosed and treatable.

Elon University biology professor Dr. Sandra Seidel previously worked in the sleep clinic at Stanford University, where she dealt with common sleep disorders on a daily basis. "We would see patients with all sorts of problems," Seidel said. "They would sleep with magnets glued to their heads so that we could monitor them overnight and make a complete diagnosis the next day."

There are four major levels of sleep according to Seidel. Levels one and two are described as REM sleep, the light sleep where a person spends the most time and where dreaming occurs. Levels three and four are deep

According to the NHTSA, approximately 1.5 percent of 100,000 accidents are caused by drowsiness. It is estimated that 1,500 fatalities and 71,000 injuries are a result of drowsy drivers each year.

sleep. Adolescents spend the majority of their time in deep sleep. The amount of deep sleep decreases with age.

"The pattern that brain waves show during the different levels of sleep allow doctors to diagnose problems," Seidel said. "When there are variations in a normal pattern, that is when things such as insomnia, apnea and narcolepsy occur."

Insomnia is the most common sleep disorder, and it involves difficulty in falling asleep, staying asleep or even sleeping at all. "People would come to us thinking they were not sleeping," Seidel said. "They were actually sleeping, but it would be very fitful or very little at all."

For the majority of people diagnosed with insomnia, there are physiological or physical problems that cause the disorder to occur. Stress, excessive caffeine intake, job shift changes and problems such as a bad back or arthritis can cause insomnia. In most insomnia cases, doctors can prescribe medication, but for the majority of insomnia sufferers, all that is needed is more rest.

"There are numerous over-the-counter remedies for sleep disorders, but for the majority of people, all that they need to do is sleep at normal times and without any distractions," Seidel said.

While insomnia is very common and treatable, sleep apnea is much more serious and can carry with it serious physical repercussions. "People with apnea have trouble breathing, and this continuous loss of oxygen can lead to numerous other health problems," Seidel said.

First described as a disease in 1965, sleep apnea is a breathing disorder that occurs during the first two stages of sleep. Patients suffering from interruptions in breathing during sleep categorize the disorder. Sleep apnea is often mistaken for normal snoring, but while snoring can be

stopped when a person is shifted into a different sleeping position, apnea is more permanent.

"Apnea generally occurs in middle-aged, obese males," Seidel said. "An excess of flabby tissue around the throat causes a cutoff of air during sleep, and this can cause choking for air, and in some cases, heart attack or stroke."

In order to combat sleep apnea, doctors can perform surgery to remove excess flabby tissue, and they can also hook patients up to machines that keep airways open. "While there are numerous ways to stop snoring, surgery is the best way to combat extreme cases of sleep apnea," Seidel said.

Narcolepsy is a long-lasting neurological sleep disorder that hinders the body's central nervous system. When people suffer from narcolepsy, the messages the brain sends out to the body about when to sleep get mixed up. This causes people to fall asleep at inopportune times, such as while eating or at various other times that they want to be awake.

Driving is one of these times. While many traffic accidents involving sleep are caused by normal drowsiness, narcolepsy has been the cause of many of these accidents as well. Because narcolepsy can strike at any time, people have no control over it, and it can seriously hinder everyday life, especially driving.

The best way to treat narcolepsy is with medication. These medications straighten out the neurotransmitters in the brain, and patients are able to have normal sleep patterns.

These three sleep disorders are the cause for much of the daytime sleepiness that occurs each year. Many people suffering from these disorders are undiagnosed and untreated. "It is very expensive to have a sleep study done, and many health insurance companies do not cover them," Seidel said. "Because of that, many people suffer from these disorders."

An Invitation to Speak with President Lambert

Students are invited to join Dr. Lambert in the Hearth Lounge in Moseley Center on Wednesday, Nov. 14 from 4 - 5 p.m. for refreshments and conversation.

Please come with questions, ideas or concerns you would like to discuss with the president.

Paid Singer Vacancies
No Solo Performance Required
First Christian United Church of Christ
Burlington

1 Weekly Service & Rehearsal

Church Phones: 226-7428 or 228-7098



auditions

Paramount's Carowinds
will host performer auditions and technical
support interviews for Paramount Parks
2002 Entertainment Program in:

<p>CHARLOTTE, NC Saturday, November 3, 2001 Sunday, November 4, 2001 Paramount's Carowinds The Paramount Theater 1pm Instrumentalists 2pm Singers, Actors, Variety, Technicians 3pm Dancers, Costumers, Dressers</p>	<p>ELON, NC Friday, November 9, 2001 Elon University 203 N. Williamson Avenue Faith Rockefeller Model Center for the Arts 3:00pm Singers, Actors, Variety, Technicians 4:00pm Dancers, Costumers, Dressers</p>
<p>CHARLOTTE, NC Saturday, November 10, 2001 Sunday, November 11, 2001 Paramount's Carowinds/The Paramount Theater 1pm Instrumentalists 2pm Singers, Actors, Variety, Technicians 3pm Dancers, Costumers, Dressers</p>	<p></p> <p>For more dates and information call 704.587.9011 or visit our website at www.auditionnow.com <small>Paramount Parks is an equal opportunity employer. © & © 2001 Paramount Parks</small></p>