

# Cheating Sleep

## Drowsy Driving by Teens Can Cause Holiday Heartache



By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.

In this season of downy flake, it might be tempting to think that poet Robert Frost had teens in mind when he wrote: "The woods are lovely, dark, and deep, but I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep. And miles to go before I sleep."

Sound familiar?

Now, of course, Frost's traveler was on horseback, no doubt ameliorating some of today's concerns regarding drowsy young people driving automobiles – a significant problem among teens, according to new research from Liberty Mutual Insurance and SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions).

Indeed, overscheduled, overstressed, and overtired teens are a threat to themselves – and others – as they too often climb behind the wheel having had too little sleep. For example, 36 percent of teen drivers say they frequently drive while tired in the morning. Perhaps more significant, they report getting an average of only 7.2 hours of sleep on school nights.

And that can have costly outcomes.

According to the survey, young people who get less than eight hours of sleep per night on average are twice as likely to say they have fallen asleep at the wheel (20 percent) than are teens who report getting an average of eight or more hours of sleep per night (10 percent).

The National Sleep Foundation (NSF), which recently promoted Drowsy

Driving Prevention Week, says that the practice is an "under-reported and under-recognized public safety issue plaguing America's roadways," pointing out that it can be just as dangerous as impaired driving.

They may be onto something.

Drowsy driving causes more than 10,000 crashes each year, leading to 40,000 injuries and 1,550 deaths, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Make no mistake about it, the combination of sleepiness, inexperience, and a tendency to drive at night and in the early morning hours puts young adults at risk for drowsy driving crashes.

Just as frightening are some of the strategies teens say they employ to try to stay awake.

- Playing loud music (49 percent)
- Talking on a cell phone (22 percent)
- Speeding (11 percent)
- Text messaging (11 percent)

Other concerns about sleepy teens include the relationship between insufficient rest and obesity, depression, drug abuse, and future cardiovascular disease, according to Byron J. Richards, a board-certified clinical nutritionist, who told NaturalNews.com, "Sleep problems in children and teens have reached a crisis level in America."

So, what's the remedy? More sleep.

The NSF recommends that teens should be getting between 8.5 and 9.5 hours of sleep to be fully rested. Others say the best number is even higher.

In either case, it sounds like a simple solution. In truth, it may be hard to achieve.

First of all, developmental prerogatives dictate that teens need more sleep than adults do – and just as their natural sleep rhythms shift to later cycles. In other words, during adolescence, teens are hard-wired to stay up later at night and sleep later in the morning. But still we torment them with early school starts and, often, morning commitments on weekends.

Thank goodness for the holidays!

But then again, even though they may have more chance to rest, teens' holiday schedules remain cramped. And research suggests that holiday periods are particularly dangerous times of year on roads and highways.

What's a busy teen to do? Here are a couple of tips from the NSF.

- Use the buddy system – ask your passenger to stay awake during the drive, to help keep you awake, and to share the driving responsibilities.
- If sleepiness sets in while driving, prevent a crash by pulling over to find a safe place to take a nap.

Of course, Mom and Dad have a role to play, too. Liberty Mutual/SADD research reminds us that parents are the most influential voices in their teens' driving behaviors and that young people tend to drive more safely when they are presented with

family driving rules that are enforced, such as:

- Minimum sleep requirements in order to drive;
- No driving after 10 p.m.; and
- No cell phone use, including text messaging.

Unfortunately, “early to bed, early to rise” doesn't synch well with suddenly nocturnal teens who are balancing late nights, early mornings, and jam-packed schedules. They want to do it all, but our job is to help them regulate competing demands in a way that keeps them safe behind the wheel.

Especially when they have miles to go before they sleep.

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