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### Drowsy Driving

Sleepiness while driving is a problem that needs to be addressed...immediately. A study was recently released by the American Automobile Association (AAA) that estimates one out of every six deadly traffic accidents, and one out of eight crashes requiring hospitalization of car drivers or passengers is due to drowsy driving. As a board certified sleep medicine physician, I feel compelled to address this issue. 70 million people in our country suffer from some type of sleep disorder. If you or a loved one is often tired, suffers from excessive daytime sleepiness, or has a tendency to nod off while driving, please talk to your doctor. Drowsy driving is both preventable and treatable.

Although certain segments of the population are more prone to drowsy driving, such as commercial truck drivers, shift workers, young men, people taking sedating medicines, or those with sleep disorders, drowsy driving is such a prevalent condition that in many cases it is the average 'driver next door' who just happens to be putting in extra hours at work, adjusting to a new baby in the household, staying out late for a party, or trying to make it back home after an out-of-town trip.

The thing to remember is all people need between 7 and 9 hours of uninterrupted sleep a night to feel well rested and function at their fullest. Studies have linked sleepiness and fatigue to decreases in vigilance, reaction time, memory, psychomotor coordination, information processing, and decision making, all of which are needed for safe driving. As a matter of fact, the effects of sleepiness on driving performance are akin to that of an intoxicated driver.

People frequently do not realize, or deny how sleepy they are, and whether their sleepiness interferes with their driving. However, several indicators of drowsiness and drowsy driving include:

- Frequent blinking, longer duration blinks and head nodding
- Having trouble keeping one's eyes open and focused
- Memory lapses or daydreaming
- Drifting from one's driving lane or off the road

Awareness of the signs of drowsiness might be helpful, but only if drivers attend to those signs by pulling off the road and getting sufficient sleep. If that is not possible, studies suggest two interventions that may be helpful: taking a short, 20-minute nap, and/or drinking two cups of coffee or other equivalently caffeinated beverages. Be aware, caffeine will improve alertness only for a short period of time, and should not be relied upon to make up for a sleep deficit. Chronic drowsiness while driving should be discussed with your physician.

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