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Drowsy drivers a bigger risk on roads, study finds

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People who would never get behind the wheel after a few drinks think nothing of driving when they need a few winks.

More than four in 10 Americans say they've nodded off while driving, according to a new study that blames more crash injuries and deaths than previously thought on drowsy motorists.

Amid stepped-up warnings about the risks of texting and other driving distractions, the report shows one of the most basic driving *don'ts* remains one of the most deadly.

One in every six highway fatalities and one in every eight crashes that end with someone in the hospital can be attributed to driver fatigue, according to the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

The group surveyed U.S. drivers and analyzed nationwide crash data.

"So much attention has been given to distractions, and drunk driving has been on the radar for some time," said Dan Bleier, a spokesman for the AAA Foundation. "But something as simple as staying awake behind the wheel stays under the radar."

A 2007 federal survey estimated that 2.2 percent of people driving on weekend nights were drunk. The new AAA survey reports that 41 percent of Americans say they've fallen asleep at the wheel during their lifetime. More than a quarter of those drivers said they have nodded off in the past month.

The effects of alcohol, drugs and fatigue are about the same, experts say. Sleepy drivers have slower reaction time, impaired judgment and lower awareness. They also take more risks.

In Ohio, driving schools are required to teach about the effects of fatigue.

Donna Keel, owner of Schwartz Driver Training in Grove City, said her schools cover the dangers of drinking, drugs and lack of sleep.

"It's just as dangerous to drive when you're tired as it is to drive after you've had a few beers," she

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said.

Andrew Van Meter of Columbus acknowledges that he has hit the road when he should have hit the sack.

"You go over those strips on the side of the highway, you hear that noise, you jerk the wheel," he said.

And why does he do it?

"Responsibilities."

Experts advise getting at least six hours of sleep the night before a long trip. You also should take a break every two hours or every 100 miles.

Keel said she also tells people that those breaks should not include a quick nap. It's better to stretch or take a walk, she said.

This week, the National Transportation Safety Board also held a forum on the graying of the roads. Within 15 years, people 65 or older will make up more than 20 percent of the driving population, officials said.

But research shows that elderly drivers are getting into fewer fatal crashes. It's unclear why that is the case.

Information from The Washington Post was included in this story.

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