

The Truth about Fatigue

Proponents of mandatory OSA screening for truck drivers with a body mass index (BMI) of 35 or greater, often refer to a statement released by an international group of scientists which proclaims that fatigue causes between 15 to 20 percent of all large truck accidents. It is important to note however that the document is not exclusive to either truck drivers or to drivers within the United States, but also includes commercial operations in the air, at sea, and on railways from various countries.¹

The concept or the definition of fatigue is frequently misunderstood and it should be noted that there is no current consensus about what fatigue is or how it should be measured. One possible definition provided by the Norwegian Centre for Transport Research explained that, “Fatigue is a suboptimal psychophysiological condition caused by exertion. The degree and dimensional character of the condition depends on the form, dynamics, and context of exertion. The context of exertion is described by the value and meaning of performance to the individual; rest and sleep history; circadian effects; psychosocial factors spanning work and home life; individual traits; diet; health; fitness and other individual states; and environmental conditions. The fatigue condition results in changes in strategies or resource use such that original levels of mental processing or physical activity are maintained or reduced.”²

Irrespective of the facts, FMCSA, as well as others, continue to disseminate misperceptions and falsehoods concerning fatigue, including the statistic purported by the Agency itself that between 7 and 20 percent of all large truck crashes are due to drowsy and fatigued driving. Nevertheless, FMCSA’s own data concerning large truck and bus fatal crashes demonstrates that the percent of fatal accidents involving truck drivers that are related to “asleep or fatigued” are very small. The following table was taken from FMCSA’s *Large Truck and Bus Crash Facts* and effectively demonstrates that over the past several years, between 1.4 and 1.8 percent of large truck fatal crashes were related to fatigue.

Table 1: Large Truck Fatal Crashes by Impairment-Related Factors

| Impairment-Related Factors | 2011 | | 2012 | | 2013 | | 2014 | | 2015 | |
|----------------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| | Number | Percent | Number | Percent | Number | Percent | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| Asleep or Fatigued | 64 | 1.8% | 64 | 1.7% | 56 | 1.4% | 68 | 1.8% | 55 | 1.4% |
| Total Crashes | 3,568 | 100.0% | 3,774 | 100.0% | 3,872 | 100.0% | 3,697 | 100.0% | 3,996 | 100.0% |

Source: *Large Truck and Bus Crash Facts 2013* and *Large Truck and Bus Crash Facts 2014*

¹ T Akerstedt, “Consensus Statement: fatigue and accidents in transport operations,” *J. Sleep Res* (2000) 9, 395, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/12204395_Consensus_Statement_Fatigue_and_accidents_in_transport_operations

² Ross Owen Phillips, *What is fatigue and how does it affect the safety performance of human transport operators? Fatigue in Transport Report I*, Norwegian Centre for Transport Research (2014), pg. ii.