

Drowsy drivers loath simple solution: pull over, take a nap

Many of us fall asleep behind wheel, study reveals

BY SEAN PEARCE
Staff Writer

We've all done it.

One moment you're driving along, late at night or early in the morning, when, suddenly, those heavy eyelids droop closed.

A second later, your head snaps up, you blink a few times and try to shake the sleep out of your eyes.

One second you're scanning Hwy. 404 looking for Aurora Road, the next you're taking the next exit to slumberland.

You're hardly alone.

New research from the Traffic Injury Research Foundation shows nearly 1.3 million Ontarians spent

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— York Regional Police
Sgt. Brad Bulmer

at least a second or two asleep at the wheel in the past year.

In fact, of those, more than 100,000 took a rolling respite on five or more occasions.

That's a significant worry for foundation research associate Ward Vanlaar.

"The number of fatigued and drowsy drivers in Ontario is a mat-

ter of major concern because of the elevated crash risk they pose," Mr. Vanlaar said.

"These drivers accounted for 5.5 million driving trips during which they fell asleep or nodded off."

The poll suggests the number of drivers involved in a drowsy or fatigued accident may be as high as 167,000 and that doesn't include near misses.

Many drivers polled said they had to brake hard or swerve to avoid a collision upon awakening.

It's a difficult problem to tackle, Mr. Vanlaar said, because with impaired driving and speeding grabbing most of our collected attentions, drowsy driving barely registers.

Of course, there are many reasons why those in the poll were exhausted in the first place. These included a lack of sleep the night before, lengthy trips and excessive driving stints, just

to name a few.

Ontarians also try a number of ways to combat drowsiness such as opening windows, listening to the radio, caffeine, eating, singing and even slapping or pinching themselves. The best strategy, Mr. Vanlaar said, is napping, but most of those in the study shunned the idea of stopping to grab some shut-eye.

Drowsy driving is indeed a problem that needs to be addressed on York Region's roads, York Regional Police Sgt. Brad Bulmer said.

"Fatigue is an issue," he said. "We've seen collisions occur as a result of excessive fatigue."

York Regional Police have launched a campaign in place called Operation Stay Focused that aims to keep drivers paying attention to the road ahead and away from distractions such as cellphones, Sgt. Bulmer said.

Part of the blitz includes issuing a wake-up call to drowsy drivers.

It's not always the easiest thing to spot, but there are certainly signs a driver might be suffering from fatigue behind the wheel. In those cases, Sgt. Bulmer encourages other motorists to call 911 and report the vehicle as they would for a suspected impaired driver. It could save a life.

"We could get our officers out and find (the driver) is not impaired, he's just finished working an 18-hour day and he's exhausted," Sgt. Bulmer said. "That's a concern too."

The fix to the problem is, thankfully, quite easy Mr. Vanlaar said.

"Get a good night's sleep before, plan ahead, take regular breaks when driving for long periods and drive during daylight hours, if possible," he said.

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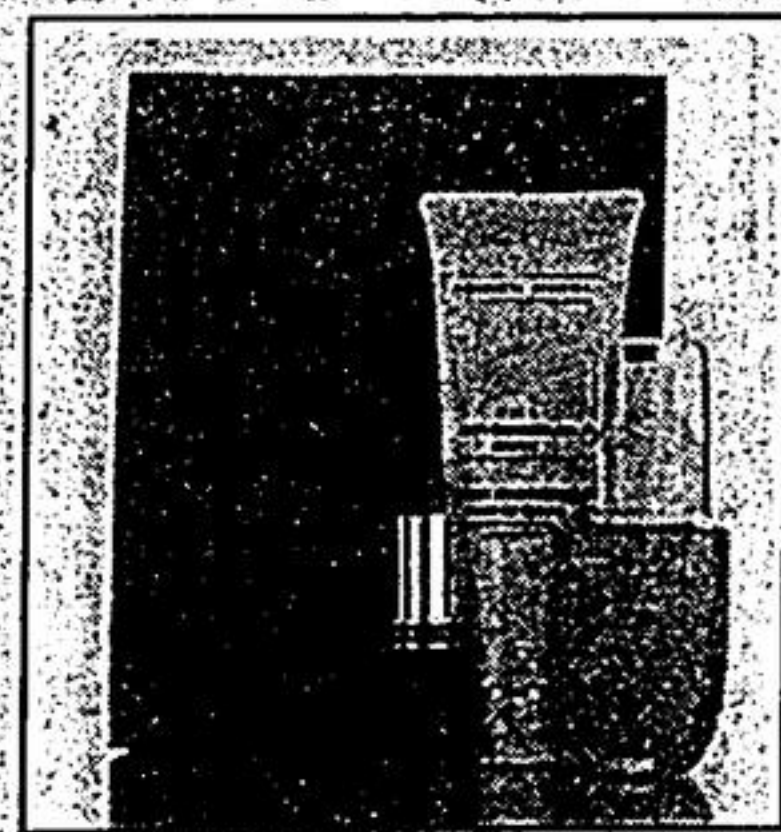
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