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Traveling in the 'Twilight Zone'

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The Soldier was short on sleep when he nodded off behind the wheel at 11 p.m., taking out a railroad crossing guardrail at 70 mph. When he woke again he was in the hospital. According to the county sheriff's report, he hadn't been drinking or using drugs — he'd just been "dog" tired. Fortunately, he survived with only some cracked ribs and cuts on his forehead. However, things could've ended much differently — he could've wound up "dead" tired.

The American Automobile Association estimates nearly 20 percent of fatal crashes involve driver fatigue. In human costs, that's more than 1,500 fatalities and 71,000 injuries each year, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Much is said about alcohol-impaired driving; however, fatigue can have similar effects on driver performance. The National Sleep Foundation reports that individuals awake 17 hours without rest are as impaired as those who have a blood alcohol content of 0.05. Ratchet that up to 20 hours and you reach the same level of impairment as someone legally drunk. In addition, your risks are highest during those times your body would rather be in bed than in the car — those "twilight zones" between midnight and 6 a.m. and during mid-afternoon.

It's important to recognize when you're at risk. Here are some warning signs:

- Trouble focusing, keeping your eyes open or your head up
- Yawning or rubbing your eyes repeatedly
- Daydreaming or having wandering thoughts
- Drifting from your lane, tailgating or missing signs and exits
- Restlessness, irritability or aggressiveness
- Turning up the radio or rolling down the window
- Slower reaction times or poor judgment

The NSF recommends you protect yourself, your passengers and others on the road by taking the following steps:

- Get a good night's sleep before a long drive. You'll be asked how much pre-travel sleep you plan to get when using the Travel Risk Planning System (TRiPS).
- Should you feel tired, pull over immediately at a safe place and take a short (15- to 20-minute) nap.
- Drive with a friend. A passenger who remains awake can help watch for signs of fatigue and take a turn driving.
- Always wear your seat belt.

For more information on the dangers of drowsy driving, check out the following websites: www.drowsydriving.org/, www.nhtsa.org and <https://safety.army.mil/>.

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