



FIT TO DRIVE

How Healthy Mood, Food and Sleep Habits
Keep You Safe Behind the Wheel



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WHAT YOU DO OFF THE CLOCK AFFECTS YOUR SAFETY BEHIND THE WHEEL

From foul weather to [distracted drivers](#) and the distractions within your own vehicle, the conditions you're driving in constantly change. Because of that, you need to be on top of your game every time you're behind the wheel.

Challenges facing drivers are universal, no matter what type of vehicle you are driving or where you live. Among those challenges is how fit you are to drive, and that's something that changes from day to day (or even from one hour to the next).

Safe driving practices begin before you ever buckle up your seat belt, and they continue after you've turned off the engine for the day. How alert you are and how you feel physically, mentally and emotionally significantly affect your driving behavior.

In this e-book, we'll look at four factors that affect your performance behind the wheel and how to improve each of them to ensure that you're fit to drive.

“SAFE DRIVING PRACTICES BEGIN BEFORE YOU EVER BUCKLE UP YOUR SEAT BELT, AND THEY CONTINUE AFTER YOU’VE TURNED OFF THE ENGINE FOR THE DAY.”



PART 1

HOW DROWSY DRIVING AFFECTS PERFORMANCE

Drowsy driving is a significant problem, and it continues to get worse. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, [fatigued drivers](#) were responsible for killing more than 800 people in 2015, and, in that same year, more than 72,000 police-reported crashes were attributed to drowsy driving.

According to the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, people who get less than seven hours of [sleep per night](#) are **four times more likely to have a crash**.

While you wouldn't consider getting behind the wheel of a vehicle after several drinks, if you're like most people, you may not put much thought into driving when you're sleep deprived.

There are a number of different reasons you feel fatigued; maybe you're taking a medication, fighting a cold or illness that affects your alertness or perhaps you were up most of the night with a sick child. Or it could be that you just stayed up too late.

Whatever the cause, the effect is the same: you're not at your best the next day. Whether you are commuting to work or spending your entire workday behind the wheel, you need to make sure you're well rested and fit to drive.



BLOCK BLUE LIGHT FOR BETTER REST

One of the biggest culprits keeping drivers from getting enough rest is exposure to blue light from electronic devices. Looking at bright screens – whether it's a tablet, smart phone or computer screen – disrupts your sleep cycle.

That's because they use blue light, which suppresses your melatonin production. Melatonin is critical to getting proper sleep, and when its production is disrupted, you may find it difficult to sleep. During the daytime, blue light can boost your mood, productivity and reaction time. At night, it can prevent you from getting a good night's rest, leading to drowsy driving the next day.

Putting away your electronic devices a couple of hours before you go to bed can have a big impact on how well you sleep. Checking emails or social media on your

phone "just for a second" right before bedtime sends a blue light signal to your brain that it's time to wake up. Your brain will have to start the process of shutting down for the night all over again.

Turning off notifications overnight or keeping your phone in another room will also help you get better sleep, since you won't be disturbed by the ping of incoming messages or updates.

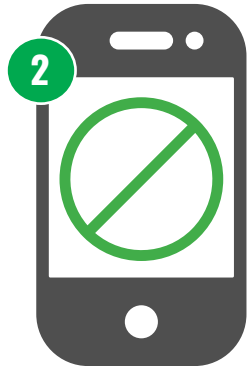
If you recognize that you're fighting drowsiness when you're behind the wheel, don't try to power through it. Pull over, take a brisk walk, drink some water or coffee or, if necessary, take a 20-minute nap.

There's no substitute for a well-rested driver, but learning how to combat the effects of fatigue can help keep you safe.

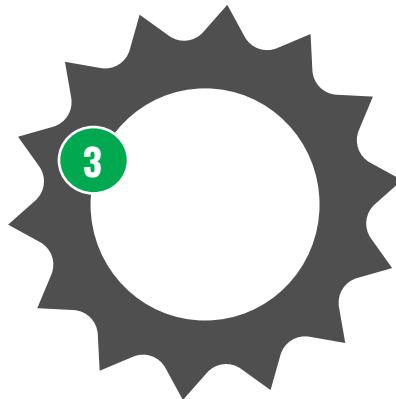
5 TIPS TO PREVENT DROWSY DRIVING



Commit to getting seven to eight hours of sleep each night.



Avoid looking at screens for two to three hours before bedtime, and don't sleep with mobile phones near the bed.



Expose yourself to bright light during the day to boost your mood and alertness; it will also help you sleep better at night.



Check prescription and over-the-counter medicines for the side effect of drowsiness.



Be aware of the peak times for sleepy driving (midnight to 6 a.m. and late afternoon), and monitor yourself for signs of drowsiness.



PART 2

EATING RIGHT FOR THE ROAD

Eating healthy is a challenge for most people, but if you spend most of your day behind the wheel, it's even trickier. You have to either plan well in advance to make sure you have healthy food with you, or you have to look for healthy meal options when you stop to eat.

Studies show that people who drive for a living have a higher rate of being overweight and obese, affecting both their mortality and their absentee rate at work. It leads to poor health and conditions like heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes.

Long-haul truck drivers often find it particularly challenging. Truck stops are known for offering inexpensive sweets like candy bars and soda, while restaurant specials often feature high-calorie foods. In addition to leading to poor health in the long run, these types of food also affect how you feel and how alert you are immediately after you eat, which have a direct effect on how well you drive.

Even if you aren't on the road for days at a time, you still face the challenge of getting proper nutrition when you spend most of your day driving. Putting more thought into your food choices and planning ahead for healthy eating will make it easier to maintain a good nutritional plan.

If you drive a particular route regularly, look for restaurants with healthy choices that you can frequent. Knowing in advance where you can find a good, healthy meal will help you avoid the temptation of making an impulse decision that you might regret later. You can also keep a cooler in your vehicle with premade healthy meals and snacks.

5 WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR EATING HABITS



- 1. Time it right.** Eating a small meal every three hours can prevent blood sugar crashes that cause fatigue, loss of concentration and shakiness. If you eat small amounts frequently, you will stay energized instead of getting that post-meal slump.
- 2. Pursue protein.** Protein helps stabilize your blood sugar and can make the energy from carbohydrates last longer. Aim for a balance of protein and carbs every time you eat, whether it's a meal or a snack.
- 3. Forget the sugar.** Whether you eat it or drink it, sugar is bad for you. It can give you a quick boost but can cause your energy to drop just as quickly. Avoid it, and you might be surprised how much better you feel.
- 4. Find some fat.** Good fats are good for your brain, both in the short and long term. Avoid deep fried foods and trans fats and add healthy Omega 3 fats to your diet with foods like olive oil, fish, avocados and nuts. Not only are you lowering your risk for conditions ranging from depression to heart disease to Alzheimer's, but you're keeping your brain happier and more alert.
- 5. Drink plenty of water.** Proper hydration is essential for mental alertness and concentration, so aim to get your eight glasses of water a day – every day. Remember that alcohol consumed after hours and caffeinated drinks are dehydrating. Drinking enough water each day will counter those effects.

<https://www.aarp.org/auto/driver-safety/info-2013/exercise-for-safety.html>



PART 3 USE EXERCISE TO PREVENT DRIVING FROM BEING A PAIN

Sitting behind the wheel is hard on your body in many ways. It can cause [back stiffness and pain](#), tightness in your hamstrings and calves, neck pain and aching shoulder muscles. When that pain becomes chronic, it affects your sleep, focus and overall mood. All of these factors influence your performance behind the wheel.

Your body is made to move, and driving runs counter to that. Implementing an [exercise or stretching routine](#) before and after you drive, as well as [adding in some movement](#) every time you stop, can improve your mood and mental alertness and keep your muscles from stiffening up. Exercise is crucial for blood circulation, which delivers nutrients and oxygen to your muscles and brain.

The good news is, you don't have to commit to a lengthy exercise routine. Adding even 10 to 12 minutes of movement before you climb into your vehicle for the day can make a big difference in how you feel.

3 TYPES OF EXERCISES TO DO BEFORE GETTING BEHIND THE WHEEL



- 1. Strength exercises.** You don't have to be a powerlifter; even light weights improve muscle strength and endurance, making your muscles feel less tired as you drive.
- 2. Range of motion exercises.** Keeping your joints flexible will reduce pain, improve strength and balance, and make you safer and more alert behind the wheel. Use head and neck tilts, wrist bends and rotations and leg, knee and foot/ankle rotations to retain (or regain) your flexibility.
- 3. Flexibility exercises.** Stretching your shoulders, chest and legs can help release feelings of tightness in those areas and prevent muscle pain and spasms. Learning some gentle yoga moves will help ease pressure on your back and other problem areas after a long day in the vehicle and help you rest better. If you can implement a few minutes of stretching before beginning your day, you'll get the blood flowing and enhance your mental alertness.



KEEP IT MOVING

Any kind of movement you can add to your life will benefit you when you're driving. When you make a stop, take a walk, even if it's a short one. Find ways to move around when you aren't behind the wheel. Start bicycling, running or picking up a sport that you've always loved.

The benefits of adding exercise to your daily routine go far beyond making you feel better at the wheel – it can also make you a better driver. A study by The Hartford Center for Mature Market Excellence and the MIT AgeLab found that simple exercises could lead to greater safety on the roads and improve driving-related movements, such as getting in and out of vehicles and being able to turn to look when changing lanes or backing up.



Heat It Up For Greater Comfort

In addition to exercising, take steps to keep your back warm while you drive; it will help ease discomfort when you're sitting for extended time periods. Use the seat warmers in your vehicle, a heating pad or even a long-lasting heat wrap to keep your lower back muscles warm.



PART 4

EMOTIONAL WRECKS? HOW YOUR MOOD AFFECTS YOUR DRIVING BEHAVIOR

You already know that good days and bad days are just part of life. But did you know that a [bad mood](#) can be deadly behind the wheel?

A study from the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute found that emotions like anger, sadness and agitation increased the risk of crashes by nearly 10 times. That's almost as dangerous as speeding or using your phone while driving.

Strong emotions can interfere with your decision-making process and slow your reaction times. They jeopardize your safety and the safety of those on the road around you.

Of course, [negative emotions](#) are inevitable. They can come from an argument with a spouse, a bad day at

work or bad news. Strong emotions may arise even more quickly when a driver cuts you off in traffic or you find yourself in a traffic jam that's making you late for an appointment.

This can lead to aggressive driving and road rage, but distraction caused by a bad mood can also cause driving errors such as failing to notice directional signs, drifting into another lane and rear-ending another car.

If you're on the road daily, it's more likely that the stress of traffic and other drivers will spark negative emotions. Knowing how to handle these situations as they arise and having a plan in place can help keep you calmer and more relaxed behind the wheel. That, in turn, makes you a better driver.

4 WAYS TO COMBAT NEGATIVE EMOTIONS BEHIND THE WHEEL



1. Create a calming playlist. What's your favorite go-to tune? Music has a proven effect on moods; it can bring you down or lift you up. Researchers in the Netherlands found that "individually selected music can induce and maintain moods while driving." The study found that listening to music of their choice lowered drivers' breathing rate, even under stressful situations, and they made better driving decisions.



2. Practice breathing techniques. When you're upset, it's common to take short, shallow breaths, which only [add to your anger and anxiety](#). Taking slow, deep breaths will help slow down your heart rate, send more oxygen to your muscles and your brain and will help you relax. If necessary, pull over to the side of the road and take deep breaths until you're calm enough to drive.



3. Walk it off. Before getting behind the wheel when you're upset, [take a hike](#). Even a short walk around the block is an effective way to refocus your attention and get in a few breaths so you can release your negative emotions.



4. Be mindful. Meditation is a powerful tool for relaxation, and it can be particularly effective for drivers who have recurring stress and agitation behind the wheel. Don't worry, you don't need to spend hours in the lotus position. Mobile apps like [Headspace](#) and [10% Happier](#) offer short guided meditations.



STAY FIT TO DRIVE SAFE

Driving safety is affected by both internal and external factors. Learning how your daily habits affect your driving is an effective way to improve your behavior behind the wheel – and have a safer, more enjoyable driving experience overall.



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ABOUT SMITH SYSTEM

Founded in 1952, Smith System is the nation's first fleet driver safety training organization. Smith System instructors and certified trainers deliver behind-the-wheel instruction to more than 250,000 drivers annually and serve customers on every continent. Smith has been integrating driver training with telematics, driver scoring metrics and predictive risk analysis since 2012 and provides E-Learning and classroom content in multiple languages.

www.DriveDifferent.com