

Stay Awake — And Stay Alive



by **Debbie L. Feldman**

Early one morning in November 1998, Lucy Canty, of Wilmington, N.C., was driving home from a nine-hour shift of cleaning offices. "I was exhausted, and I hadn't gotten any sleep the day before," she recalls. "All I know is, I fell asleep and when I woke up, I was hitting a parked van."

Drowsiness and driving can be deadly. According to the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, authorities estimate that drowsy drivers cause 50 percent of the fatal crashes on the Pennsylvania Turnpike and the New York Thruway. Data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration shows that the average drowsy-driver incident is a

one-car crash that happens when a lone driver is traveling late at night or early in the morning on a high-speed road.

Sleepiness slows reaction time and impairs judgment. And you can't always tell you're drowsy until it's too late and you've fallen asleep. If you've been awake for more than 20 hours, or you're driving between midnight and 6 a.m., you're at risk of falling asleep at the wheel, says Stephanie Faul, AAA communications director. Pay attention to these warning signs:

- ◆ You have trouble keeping your head up
- ◆ You can't stop yawning
- ◆ You don't remember driving the last few miles
- ◆ You keep drifting out of your lane
- ◆ You missed your exit

If you find yourself dozing off while driving, the only way to recover is to sleep. Contrary to popular belief, turning on the radio or air conditioning or opening windows does not keep tired drivers awake. Of course, the best way to prevent drowsy driving is to be well-rested when you start your trip.

Drive with a companion if possible, and change drivers often. The passenger should talk to the driver and look for signs of driver fatigue. Schedule rest stops every 100 miles or two hours. When you stop, get out of the car and stretch or take a short walk. If you feel sleepy, lock your car doors and take a short nap. □