

Quarterly Safety & Occupational Health Council--

FATIGUE

Except from the Philadelphia Inquirer article “Dead Tired”,

It started as such an ordinary afternoon, such a leisurely Sunday, as languid and listless as the warm spring rain.

That’s what Tom Callaghy remembers.

It was overcast, but not dark. Drizzling, but not soaking. Both sky and road had turned the same muted shade of gray.

No other cars roamed the highway, and Callaghy had no reason to hurry.

He and his wife, Jane, were heading back to their Swarthmore home after spending the weekend in Virginia Beach, where they’d entered three of their Shetland sheepdogs in an agility competition. The two loved to take part in dog trials in the Mid-Atlantic region, though lately they’d been so terribly busy.

The trip to Virginia was the first time they’d been able to get away together in 10 months.

Tom, a political-science professor at the University of Pennsylvania, was worn out from the demands of running the school’s Lauder Institute. Jane was working long hours as a nurse at Crozer-Chester Medical Center. Moments after Tom started the car, Jane buckled her safety belt and fell asleep in the passenger seat.

At 1 p.m. that day--April 1,2001--they’d been on the road for 30 minutes. Their minivan reached the northern end of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, then started the trek up Virginia’s Eastern Shore along Route 13.

Callaghy noticed he was tired, more tired than he’d realized. He turned up the volume on the radio. Then he cracked a window, hoping the rush of cool air would refresh him. It didn’t.

A minute later he turned to Jane to wake her and say he was too weary to drive.

In that instant, cruising at about 60 mph, Tom Callaghy did something he could never have imagined doing. He fell asleep.

He woke up later. His wife did not.

It’s called drowsy driving, a soft, sleepy-eyed sobriquet for a little-noticed phenomenon that kills more than 1,000 people a year. Its name is misleading. Drowsy driving is ore than feeling a

Fatigue

little foggy on the rush-hour sprint to work. Drowsy driving is a dangerous condition in which people are so fatigued that they teeter on the edge of consciousness, in which sleep becomes irresistible, transforming speeding cars into pilotless, 2-ton battering rams.

Drowsy driving has so far failed to arouse the public fury and social stigma long associated with drunken driving, which kills many more people, an estimated 17,000 a year. But for individuals it can be just as deadly--a cruel truth that's beginning to register in the popular consciousness.

In August, New Jersey became the first state to criminalize drowsy driving, making sleep deprivation a basis for charges of vehicular homicide, punishable by up to 10 years in prison. "Maggie's Law" was named for 20-year-old Maggie McDonnell, of Washington Township, Gloucester County, who was killed in 1997 when a van crossed three lanes of traffic and hit her car head-on. The driver had dozed off after being awake for 30 hours.

Definition: Fatigue is a physical and/or mental exhaustion that can be triggered by stress, medication, overwork, or mental and physical illness or disease.

Description: Everyone experiences fatigue occasionally. It is the body's way of signaling its need for rest and sleep. But when fatigue becomes a persistent feeling of tiredness or exhaustion that goes beyond normal sleepiness, it is usually a sign that something more serious is amiss.

Physically, fatigue is characterized by a profound lack of energy, feelings of muscle weakness, and slowed movements or central nervous system reactions. Fatigue can also trigger serious mental exhaustion. Persistent fatigue can cause a lack of mental clarity (or feeling of mental "fuzziness"), difficulty concentrating, and in some cases, memory loss.

Causes and Symptoms: Fatigue may be the result of one or more environmental causes which as inadequate rest, improper diet, work and home stressors, or poor physical conditioning, or one symptom of a chronic medical condition or disease process in the body. Heart disease, low blood pressure, diabetes and end-stage renal disease, iron-deficiency anemia, narcolepsy, and cancer can cause long-term, ongoing fatigue symptoms. Acute illnesses such as viral and bacterial infections can also trigger temporary feelings of exhaustion. In addition, mental disorders such as depression can also cause fatigue.

Dietary Changes: Inadequate or inappropriate nutritional intake can cause fatigue.

- Drink plenty of water. Individuals should try to drink 9-12 glasses of water a day. Dehydration can reduce blood volume, which leads to feelings of fatigue.

FATIGUE

- Eating iron-rich foods (i.e., liver, raisins, spinach, apricots). Iron enables the blood to transport oxygen throughout the tissues, organs, and muscles, and diminished oxygenation of the blood can result in fatigue.
- Avoiding high-fat meals and snacks. High fat foods take longer to digest, reducing blood flow to the brain, heart, and rest of the body while blood flow is increased to the stomach.
- An overstuffed stomach can cause short-term fatigue, and individuals who are over weight are much more likely to regularly experience fatigue symptoms.

Lifestyle Changes: Lifestyle factors such as a high-stress job, erratic work hours, lack of social or family support, or erratic sleep patterns can all cause prolonged fatigue. Maintaining healthy sleep patterns is critical to proper rest. Having a set “bedtime” helps to keep sleep on schedule. A calm and restful sleeping environment is also important to healthy sleep. Above all, the bedroom should be quiet and comfortable, away from loud noises and with adequate window treatments to keep sunlight and streetlights out. Removing distractions from the bedroom, such as televisions and telephones can also be helpful.

Prevention: Many of the treatments outlined above are also recommended to prevent the onset of fatigue. Getting adequate rest and maintaining a consistent bedtime schedule are the most effective ways to combat fatigue. A balanced diet and moderate exercise program are also important to maintaining a consistent energy level.