

TRUCK TALK

A Publication of
Continental Western Group®



AUGUST 2010

Sleep Apnea

By now, we have all heard the rumors and truck stop talk about sleep apnea: “drivers over 250 lbs. won’t be able to drive” or, “drivers with a neck size of 18 or more won’t be able to pass their physical”, or “once I turn 65 I won’t be able to get a medical card”. Sleep apnea has been around a long time and has gotten the attention of regulatory agencies over the past few years.

Staying awake means staying alive. This is a slogan used to describe a research study on sleep apnea sponsored by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) and the American Transportation Research Institute of the American Trucking Associations (ATA). The research project addressed the prevalence of sleep apnea among commercial truck drivers, potential risk factors, and its impact on driving performance.

Apnea is a term for the suspension of external breathing. During apnea there is no movement of the muscles of respiration and the volume of air and gas in your lungs remains unchanged. Under normal conditions, humans cannot store much oxygen in the body, so prolonged periods of apnea leads to severe lack of oxygen in the blood as it circulates throughout the body.

Sleep apnea is a major contributor to daytime drowsiness – a condition that could prove deadly for commercial truck drivers and involved passenger vehicles. It is a condition where, during sleep, a narrowing or closure of the upper airway causes repeated sleep disturbances leading to poor sleep quality and excessive daytime sleepiness. Since excessive sleepiness can be a consequence of sleeping disturbances, drivers with sleep apnea have compromised driving performance, leading to increases in the risks of crashes.

The study mentioned above revealed that the prevalence of sleep apnea depends on the relationship between two major factors, age and degree of obesity. The prevalence of sleep apnea also depends on the average duration of sleep over a period of time. Short sleep duration, 6 hours or less per night, results in the prevalence of sleep apnea. These relationships are important, because it provides the transportation industry with predictions that are useful in estimating the likelihood of sleep apnea in any population of drivers.

Although the prevalence of sleep apnea and inadequate sleep among truck drivers gives rise to serious concerns, it can be a reversible condition with effective treatment. A major challenge to ensuring driver and public safety against the adverse effects of sleep apnea is to develop cost-effective ways of identifying at-risk drivers, and ensuring a solution to this treatable and preventable problem.

There are many, many indicators that a driver may be prone to having sleep apnea, and the medical community is on board with the FMCSA in an attempt to identify these drivers and get them the help they need to combat this medical condition. You can expect your medical provider to address this issue during upcoming physical examinations of commercial drivers. You can also expect some type of legislation from FMCSA and Congress regarding sleep apnea in the very near future.

Staying awake means staying alive. That pretty much says it all.



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