

Deadly car crashes spike after changing clocks for Daylight Saving Time

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Daylight saving time may cost you more than an hour of sleep, it could cost you your life, according to a University of Colorado at Boulder study that found an increase in fatal motor vehicle accidents the first six days after the clocks spring ahead.

The study, “Spring Forward at your Own Risk: Daylight Savings Time and Fatal Vehicle Crashes” by Austin C. Smith at the University of Colorado Boulder, reported that in the first six days of daylight saving time there were 302 deaths and a cost of \$2.75 billion over a 10-year period.

The study looked at detailed records in fatal crashes in the United States, the change from daylight saving time to standard time and the impact of extending daylight saving time in 2007.

The Fatal Accident Reporting System found a 17 percent increase in traffic fatalities on the Monday after the shift.

The loss of one hour occurs at 2 a.m., jumping straight to 3 a.m., resulting in a 23-hour day. Congress adopted uniform daylight saving time in 1966, and various amendments have extended it. In 2007, daylight saving time was extended to begin on the second Sunday in March and end on the first Sunday in November.

That loss of an hour of sleep, according to researchers, causes a significant disruption in sleep cycles.

“The ability to see what is happening ahead of you and to react to it is one of the most important things in driving,” said Chris Hayes, second vice president of transportation risk control with Travelers, a Hartford-based insurance company.

“One of the things that goes along with this is sleep. If you just lack one hour of sleep, if people stick to their normal sleep schedule, that can have quite an impact.”

According to a study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, people who sleep six to seven hours a night are twice as likely to be involved in such a crash as those sleeping eight hours or more, while people sleeping less than 5 hours increased their risk four to five times. The foundation also finds more than 250,000 people fall asleep at the wheel, some for a just a microsecond.

“When the clocks change — whether it is falling back or springing forward, peoples’ sleep cycles are interrupted, and when sleep cycles are interrupted, they tend to be drowsy,” said Mary Maguire, director of public and government affairs for AAA of Southern New England, adding that some police departments have reported as much as a 10 percent increase in crashes during the spring ahead time change.

Lack of sleep impairs driving ability, and driving drowsy can be just as dangerous as distracted and, in some cases, impaired driving.

Nearly three-quarters of adults in America (71 percent) drive a car to and from work, and many are drowsy drivers, according to the National Sleep Foundation’s 2001 Sleep in America poll. More than one-fourth of those (27 percent) said they have driven drowsy to or from work at least a few days a month, 12 percent drove drowsy a few days a week, and four percent said they drove drowsy every day or almost every day. Most crashes or near misses occur between 4 a.m. to 6 a.m.; midnight to 2 a.m. and 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. are also peak times for crashes to occur.

Traffic safety experts advise motorists to be cautious when driving while tired, and to pull over and take a nap.

“We’ve all experienced heavy eyelids and driving while drowsy and we take that for granted. We think if we have a cup of coffee, open a window, have a Red Bull, turn the radio up, that we will be OK,” Ms. Maguire said, adding that it is important for parents to have a conversation with their teen drivers — one of the most sleep-deprived segments of the population — about the dangers of driving while drowsy.

“With the time change, our body clocks do need time to adjust,” said Tim Cooney, executive director of the Central Massachusetts Safety Council. “People do need to be proactive.”

“I do know of people dozing off or nodding off, and it is a problem,” Mr. Cooney said, adding that it is just as dangerous as distracted driving. “People with sleep apnea, or highway hypnosis when driving long distances, people space out. Driving is a task that people take for granted.”

Glenda Garjales and Luz Soares, both of Worcester, notice the loss of an hour. They each start their shift at St. Vincent Hospital at 5:30 a.m. and can feel the loss of that one hour of sleep.

“It messes you up for a week,” Ms. Garjales said.

Ms. Soares says she notices that being tired – even that loss of one hour – affects her reaction time in general, so it is no surprise to her that a study has linked the first few days of Daylight Savings Time with an increase in accidents.

“I think if you go to work early, and you’ve been getting up earlier, by the end of the day you are exhausted, so I can see how that happens,” Ms. Soares said.

With the time change upon us, Mr. Hayes offers one piece of advice: “Go to bed an hour early. That is the best thing that you can do.”

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