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Drowsy Driving Prevention Week coming

Wendy Schultz

Democrat staff writer

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A road trip after a week of visiting friends and family and not getting much sleep. Driving home from work after a night of interrupted sleep. A midweek concert 90 miles away and you have to be at work the next day so you're driving home after the concert. These scenarios and many others are the precursors for drowsy driving and accidents waiting to happen.

The week of Nov. 10-16 is National Drowsy Driving Prevention Week, a national campaign sponsored by the National Sleep Foundation to save the lives of young drivers by raising awareness of the dangers of drowsy driving. With Thanksgiving coming up and thousands of Californians taking to the road after eating big turkey dinners, paying attention to the warning signs of drowsy driving is especially important.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that drowsy driving causes at least 100,000 police-reported crashes, killing more than 1,550 Americans and injuring more than 71,000 each year. A 2007 National Sleep Foundation report states that this is a conservative estimate as drowsy driving accidents are under-reported due to inconsistency in crash reporting among states.

More than 60 percent of adult drivers say they have driven a vehicle in the past year while feeling drowsy and more than one third said they have fallen asleep at the wheel, according to the National Sleep Foundation's 2005 Sleep in America poll. Approximately 11 million drivers admit they have had an accident or a near accident because they dozed off.

Young adults from 18-29 are more likely to drive while drowsy than other age groups and men are more likely than women to drive while drowsy and to fall asleep while driving, according to statistics kept by the National Sleep Foundation.

Valerie Misch, mother of local drowsy driving victim Michael Misch, has been helping her son deal with the results of a 2007 accident that left him confined to a wheelchair with physical and neurological damage. The driver, Adam Mello, reportedly fell asleep while driving a group of friends, including Misch, home from a Bay Area concert. Another passenger, Trisha Watson, was killed in the accident.

"Unfortunately, there is nothing that California does in any way regarding drowsy driving or Drowsy Driving Prevention Week," said Valeria Misch. "It's become my cause since Michael's accident. It's amazing how many accidents, injuries, deaths happen that are most likely due to the driver nodding off and no one is ever prosecuted for it ... there's no legislation about drowsy driving."

Michael Misch, 27, is one of the interviewees in a program about drowsy driving that will be aired on KCRA on Nov. 13.

The warning signs that a driver is too drowsy to safely drive include heavy eyelids, difficulty focusing, irritability, inability to remember the last few miles driven and missing exits or traffic signs, trouble keeping your head up, yawning and rubbing of the eyes, wandering and disconnected thoughts or lane drifting and tailgating. A study by researchers in Australia showed that being awake for 18 hours produced an impairment equal to a blood-alcohol concentration of .05 and .10 percent after 24 hours awake - .08 percent is considered legally drunk.

Prevention includes getting at least eight hours of sleep before hitting the road, but if a driver becomes drowsy while driving, taking a 15-20 minute nap and consuming the caffeine equivalent of two cups of coffee may help keep a driver alert for a few hours. Caffeine is best consumed 30 minutes before getting on the road and in tandem with a short nap. For drivers who regularly consume caffeine, however, it may not have much effect on increasing alertness. The best solution is to stop driving - pull off the road and find a rest stop or safe place to sleep for the night.

For more information about Drowsy Driving Prevention Week visit the Website at www.drowsydriving.org.

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