



Driver-fatigue test could stop drowsy people from getting behind the wheel

The World Today By Matthew Clayfield

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A roadside test is being developed by Victorian researchers to identify tired drivers and keep them off the road.

They hope so-called smart glasses, which track eye movements and measure the length of our blinks, might help police identify drowsy drivers and prevent fatigue-related accidents.

Professor Mark Howard, director of the Victorian Respiratory Support Service at Austin Hospital, said researchers were using devices that look at eyelid movements to detect and assess the severity of drowsiness being experienced by someone.

He said the ability to enforce alert driving had been hampered by not being able to measure drowsiness.

"Because we can't measure it very well, we've only scratched the surface in terms of educating people about that risk," Professor Howard said.

Drivers are ignoring signs of fatigue

According to the Sleep Health Foundation, a fifth of Australian adults have fallen asleep while driving and nearly a third drive while drowsy at least once a month.

Professor Howard said many drivers were not aware just how tired they may be when they get behind the wheel.

"When people are starting to notice difficulty in keeping their eyes open, they may wind the window down or turn the radio up," he said.

"They're actually signs that you're starting to become drowsy and impaired, but people tend to ignore those and don't relate them to having a higher risk of having a crash."

Samantha Cockfield, senior manager for road safety at the Victorian Transport Accident Commission, said drivers in Victoria were well aware of fatigue as a road safety issue, but some still continued to drive while tired.

She said a test reinforcing the importance of unimpaired driving would greatly enhance road safety.

"We still haven't totally cracked the fatigue nut," she said.

"It's not just those long distance trips on long weekends that are a problem — this can be a problem on any day of the week when we don't get enough sleep."



PHOTO: A roadside test is being developed to identify tired drivers and keep them off the road. (ABC News: Giulio Saggin, file photo)

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Key points:

- One-fifth of Australian adults have fallen asleep while driving
- Nearly a third drive while drowsy at least once a month
- Shift workers, parents of young children, and anyone who doesn't get enough quality sleep is at risk

Fatigue not just a problem on long weekends

Ms Cockfield said while fatigue had long been associated with long trips, groups such as shift workers and parents were at risk even on shorter journeys.

"Anybody who has shift work as a major proportion of their job, young mums with families who are waking up in the middle of the night — just really anybody who's not getting quality sleep is at risk of driving tired," she said.

Professor Howard said the key was to change drivers' behaviour in the same way that technology has been used to change behaviour with alcohol and drugs.

"We've never had any tools that can detect even severe levels of drowsiness," he said. "We can change people's behaviour by detecting that more severe level of impairment."

Victoria Police said they would be following the research with interest.

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