

New DVLA guidelines for sleep apnoea provide a reason to celebrate World Sleep Day

16th March 2018 - As we celebrate World Sleep Day, we acknowledge the importance of getting not only enough hours of sleep, but sufficient quality of sleep.

For those with untreated Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA) – believed to be around 1.4 million people in the UK alone – their sleep is disturbed. In the case of severe OSA, people with the condition can wake up hundreds of times a night without realising. As a result, they are likely to wake up still feeling sleepy, not understanding why. For those who drive for their living, whether an HGV, coach or van driver, feeling tired when you wake up means that you may well fall asleep at the wheel, which is dangerous for both themselves and other road users.

Professor John Stradling, a member of the OSA Partnership Group, says, “While awareness of OSA, and the very effective treatment available for the condition, has grown in recent years, there is an understandable reluctance from those who rely on their driving licence to come forward for treatment.

“We understand that there is a natural caution if you think you might lose your job as a result, and therefore the OSA Partnership Group has been working with healthcare professionals to encourage fast tracked treatment for vocational drivers, and also with the DVLA to try to simplify the process of reporting DVLA.”

In January 2016 a new EU Directive changed the DVLA requirements for reporting OSA and this caused considerable confusion to both healthcare professionals and patients.

However, following discussions with the DVLA, there have been some changes to the guidance provided for medical professionals when assessing whether a patient should drive, and whether they should contact the DVLA.

What these changes mean:

- If a driver is diagnosed with OSA, but does **not** have excessive sleepiness having, or likely to

have, an adverse effect on driving, they may continue to drive as normal and do not need to notify the DVLA.

- If a driver has sleepiness that **does** have an adverse effect on driving, and it is suspected that they might have OSA, they should stop driving but do not have to notify the DVLA until the diagnosis has been confirmed.
- Once a diagnosis of OSA is confirmed, the driver must stop driving and must notify the DVLA. In this case, we strongly suggest this is done in writing rather than by email or phone. The treatment for OSA is very effective so, providing it is used correctly, we often find that by the time the DVLA send through the paperwork to be completed, the driver has already been treated, and the symptoms have resolved. In this case, the DVLA should not revoke their licence.

It is important to understand that the DVLA are only concerned about symptoms, i.e. when there is sleepiness that adversely affect driving.

It should also be noted that while changes have been made to most DVLA documents and forms, there may still be some with the old guidelines, particularly on the GOV.UK website. If in doubt, we recommend that you refer to your sleep specialist who will be able to advise you.

Professor Stradling concludes, “As we mark National Sleep Day, anyone who has excessive sleepiness due to OSA should be aware that they can get treatment for the condition, and can enjoy the same quality sleep as someone without the condition. Furthermore they can drive knowing that they are no longer a danger to themselves and others on the road.”

RAC Business is an active member of the group, and spokesman Simon Peevers adds: “It is vital that the fleet sector is aware of the recent announcement from DVLA regarding Obstructive Sleep Apnoea and driving for business.

“It is not an exaggeration to say it could save lives, and certainly livelihoods, if drivers who suspect they may have the symptoms feel they can come forward and get the treatment they need without losing their licence, or posing a danger on the roads.

“We would urge fleet managers to make themselves aware of the condition if they’re not already, and more importantly how to get those who are suffering, access to the highly effective treatment they need, so they don’t lose valuable drivers.”

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Notes to Editors:

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About the OSA Partnership Group

The OSA Partnership Group is made up of members with an interest in Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA) representing clinicians, academics, fleet trade bodies, health and safety organisations and patient groups.

The Group's objectives are to raise awareness of OSA and the availability of treatment to manage the symptoms, as well as the implications if the condition goes untreated, particularly in commercial drivers.

What is Obstructive Sleep Apnoea (OSA)?

OSA is a condition that affects breathing *while you are sleeping*, due to partial or total closure of the airway behind the tongue. This:

- Disrupts your normal breathing pattern
- Causes your body to briefly wake up to restore normal breathing
- May prevent you from enjoying a good night's rest
- Is nearly always accompanied by loud snoring

OSAS is a more severe form of OSA where there is evidence of both a disruption of normal breathing patterns during sleep, *and* symptoms such as excessive sleepiness in the daytime. OSAS occurs in approximately a quarter of those with OSA.

If you suffer from OSAS, the pauses in breathing can happen hundreds of times a night, which most of the time you won't be aware of. This means you're getting less of the restorative kind of sleep required to enable you to work with the levels of energy and concentration needed to drive safely.