

SINGAPORE

One in three cabbies report 'driver fatigue'

By Kelly Ng, TODAY
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TODAY reports: NUS researchers have called for a more concerted effort to promote a healthier lifestyle among taxi drivers in Singapore.

PHOTOS



CAPTION

SINGAPORE: While waiting in line for passengers late one night, cabbie Han Poh Guan witnessed a taxi in front slide and hit a wall as its driver had fallen asleep without pulling up the handbrake.

It is common for taxi drivers to doze off on the job because of prolonged driving without a good rest, said the 57-year-old.

Long hours and sedentary conditions are perennial complaints among taxi drivers here, many of whom work beyond the 12-hours-per-day guideline suggested by the Manpower Ministry.

A recent study among 231 cabbies here also found that one in three of them experience driver fatigue, with those who work longer hours - more than 10 hours a day - reporting a higher chance of dozing off inadvertently.

More than half (55 per cent) of taxi drivers surveyed said they do not take any day off.

The study - the first to look at risk factors of fatigue driving among taxi drivers here - was conducted by the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health and published in this month's issue of the Singapore Medical Journal.

The researchers also observed that those who fall asleep at the wheel tend to report poor sleep quality, have another part-time job or consume more than three caffeinated drinks daily.

There was also a higher proportion of cabbies, relative to the adult population in Singapore, who reported chronic ailments such as hypertension, diabetes mellitus and high cholesterol.

"Effort should be made to promote a healthier lifestyle in this high-risk group, so as to curb the development of medical conditions and to prevent further complications from existing (conditions)," said the researchers, who randomly surveyed cabbies from one of the largest local companies when they were queueing to pay rental fees or waiting for their cars to be serviced.

While there are currently no official guidelines on taxi drivers' work hours and rest periods, the researchers said their findings give cause to review existing policies and implement measures to address sleep-deprived driving, such as educating drivers to recognise when weariness creeps in.

National Taxi Association (NTA) executive adviser Ang Hin Kee said cabbies drive for long hours to cover high overheads.

The Land Transport Authority's regulations requiring a minimum percentage of taxis to undertake a daily mileage of at least 250km also contribute to cabbies' daily grind, he added.

However, more has been done in recent years to care for the health of taxi drivers, Mr Ang said. For instance, the NTA has worked with the Health Promotion Board since late 2012 to bring free health screenings and workshops to cabbies, while also offering them stretch bands and pedometers.

The association also organises weekly jogging and bowling exercises during off-peak hours to "get cabbies on their feet", although drivers have been slow to take it up, Mr Ang said.

He expects the introduction of third-party taxi applications and a widened pool of relief drivers to give cabbies some relief.

Taxi drivers whom TODAY spoke to said they have to work long hours to make ends meet.

"Rent and fuel costs can go up to S\$190 a day and I have to take up to 30 trips to see net income growth," said Mr Han, who drives from 6pm to 6am every day.

While he tries to get at least eight hours of sleep daily, this is often affected by the time he reserves for his family. "I have no time and money to exercise or go for check-ups," said the ComfortDelGro driver.

Some, including Mr Kelvin Lim, still set aside time to work out. The 53-year-old TransCab driver dedicates three hours in between two driving shifts to playing basketball with his colleagues and neighbours.

"I make a very conscious effort to maintain a healthy lifestyle. This is a very high-risk job, so it is important to take care of ourselves," Mr Lim said.

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