

# Truck Driver Wellness Guide



## Introduction

Commercial truck drivers are critical to the country's distribution and transport network. So, when drivers' overall health and wellness suffer, everyone is potentially affected.

Truck drivers as a group face more health and wellness challenges than the average American worker, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Several physical and psychological stress factors—erratic schedules, deadline pressure, low amounts of physical activity, disrupted sleep patterns and poor diet—can take their toll on a driver's health. Additionally, NIOSH reports that truck drivers are twice as likely to smoke as other U.S. workers.

As a result of these factors, truck drivers are at high risk for the following health issues:

- Cardiovascular disease
- Diabetes
- Depression and anxiety
- Fatigue
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Injuries in the arms, back and neck
- Lung cancer
- Obesity
- Sleep apnea
- Stress

Truck drivers often face two or more health conditions or unhealthy behaviors. These factors can increase the chance of developing preventable, long-lasting diseases or injuries.

Fortunately, lifestyle changes can help improve physical and mental health. This guide explores how truck drivers like you can stay healthy while on the road with a healthy diet, adequate sleep, exercise, sun protection measures, ergonomics and strategies for maintaining your mental health. Reach out to us for additional wellness resources.

## Diet and Nutrition

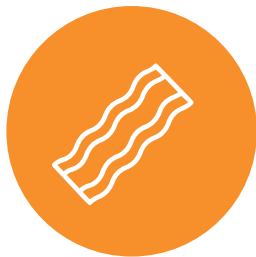
Your diet can suffer while you're on the road and face occupation-driven challenges. Because of the nature of your job, you're sitting in the driver's seat for numerous hours each week and can easily slip into a sedentary lifestyle. To avoid gaining excess weight and prevent diet-related diseases, you can stay in control of your snacking and meal choices. Consider the following healthy tips:

- **Prepare food in advance.** Rather than solely relying on convenience stores and fast-food restaurants, you can make some meals and prep snacks ahead of time. If your truck has a refrigerator, you can even store several days' worth of meals. Consider cooking lean proteins like chicken and rice or grabbing microwavable meals without preservatives. The more food you can bring along and prepare yourself, the better.
- **Focus on nutritious foods.** When grabbing food on the go, make a conscious effort for cleaner and healthier food items. For example, eat lean proteins (i.e., poultry and fish) instead of hamburgers and fried meats. If you get a salad, opt for a vinaigrette or balsamic dressing instead of one with high sugar and fat content. The goal is to focus on fiber-rich foods that will keep you feeling full longer.
- **Drink plenty of water.** Constant hydration is necessary to flush waste and toxins from your body. Drinking half a gallon of water daily is recommended for hydration, digestion and energy.
- **Don't forget about timing.** Eating every three hours can help maintain blood sugar levels, preventing energy crashes and food cravings. If you're driving late at night, be sure to eat light, as it's more difficult for your body to digest large amounts of food at night and could impact your ability to fall asleep.

Here are some healthy snack ideas you can pack ahead or find at truck stops:



Apples and peanut butter



Beef jerky



Fresh fruit



Hard-boiled eggs



Hummus and vegetables



Low-fat string cheese



Low-fat yogurt



Popcorn



Unsalted mixed nuts



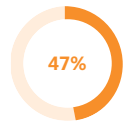
Whole-grain crackers

## Sleep Habits

Adequate sleep is essential for people in high-functioning work environments who work long hours, such as truck drivers. Poor sleep can minimize your ability to focus on the road, increase your likelihood of being involved in a crash and negatively impact your health. Fatigue is a leading cause of trucking accidents in the United States, so it's critical to prioritize sleep for your safety and the safety of everyone else on the road.

One specific sleep issue that is pervasive in the trucking industry is sleep apnea, which is usually caused by excess weight and obesity, common health problems drivers face. The disorder causes short pauses in your breathing as you sleep. These pauses typically last for at least 10 seconds at a time and can happen up to 400 times each night.

**A recent Virginia Tech Transportation Institute study found as many as 47% of commercial vehicle drivers are at potential risk for sleep apnea because of weight or neck size.**



Despite how common this condition is in the trucking industry; it has serious safety ramifications. Sleep apnea prevents sufferers from getting adequate sleep, which can be dangerous on the road. If you suspect that you have sleep apnea, contact your doctor.



**The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends 7 hours or more of sleep to be fully alert for the day.**



Consider the following tips to get quality shut-eye on the go:

- **Block light from coming into your cab.** A windshield sunshade cover and window curtains or shades can help you fall asleep quicker to recharge your body. If the light still bothers you, consider wearing an eye mask.
- **Wear earplugs to cancel out noise while sleeping.** With truck stops and rest areas being open all hours of the day, there's a high chance that someone else's truck or outside noise could disrupt your rest.
- **Avoid screen time before bed.** The blue light emitted from your smartphone and other devices can negatively impact your ability to fall asleep. Avoid looking at screens at least 30 minutes before bedtime.
- **Create a routine.** A relaxing bedtime routine can help your brain unwind and recognize that it's time to sleep. A book, audiobook or podcast can help you wind down for the day.
- **Don't eat right before going to bed.** It's best not to eat within one to three hours before sleeping. Otherwise, you could be dealing with heartburn or other digestive problems, which can get in the way of a good night's sleep.
- **Be careful with naps.** With long and odd hours, you may find naps necessary at times. However, limit naps to 30 to 45 minutes to fight off fatigue without throwing off your circadian rhythm.
- **Plan your sleep.** Build quality sleeping hours into your daily routine to ensure you can recharge before driving again.

## Physical Activity

Regular exercise is essential for everyone to stay in healthy condition. Even the smallest amounts of physical activity can benefit truck drivers' health—especially after sitting behind the wheel for hours. Fortunately, some exercise and lifestyle choices can help you healthily prevent burnout, keep up your energy and maintain good physical condition.

The Department of Health and Human Services recommends that most adults get the following exercise:

Engage in at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity each week, such as brisk walking.



Perform muscle-strengthening activities two or more days per week that target major muscle groups (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders and arms).

Getting enough physical activity between tight schedules and driving time may seem challenging. Consider the following tips for taking care of yourself on long hauls:

- **Plan out time for exercise.** After a long day driving and focusing on the road, you may be tempted to relax, but schedule time for some movement or exercise. You'll feel better once it's done.
- **Try simple cardio.** Walking, jogging and running require no equipment but can help you strengthen your heart and lungs. Even if fitness equipment is limited, walking at a truck stop or during a break is a great way to build exercise into a routine. The fresh air may even help rejuvenate you. If you need a low-impact cardio workout, check if a stationary spin bike or a folding bicycle fits in your cab.
- **Consider breathing exercises.** Breathing exercises can be a way to get stress relief anytime, anywhere. The most straightforward exercise is to breathe in through your nose for four counts, hold the breath for two counts and then exhale through your mouth for four counts. Repeating this several times can be relaxing and help clear your mind.
- **Don't forget to stretch.** Yoga and stretching exercises can help keep your body loose and limber. If you stay physically active on the road, stretching is just as crucial; it improves blood circulation, builds muscle and prevents soreness.
- **Focus on body-weight exercises.** Sit-ups, crunches, push-ups and planks require no equipment and minimal space, so you can squeeze them in during morning and evening routines or even on breaks from driving.
- **Incorporate strength training.** If you have space for some equipment, dumbbells, kettlebells and resistance bands are easy to store and transport.

## Ergonomics

Just as stretching is vital for physical activity, it's equally critical to avoid musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). Caused by a bodily reaction, overexertion or repetitive motion, MSDs affect muscles, joints, tendons, ligaments and nerves. These conditions can develop over time or immediately occur when workers overload themselves.

The reality is that your risk of developing MSDs is higher than the average American worker because of your occupation. You spend most of your workday driving in your truck or loading your rig, which increases your chances of bodily injury or even chronic physical conditions.

**Long-haul truck drivers are disproportionately affected by musculoskeletal injuries, with incidence rates for these workers found to be 3.5 times higher than the national average, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.**



MSDs often result from repeated motions on the job, slowly damaging your body. Musculoskeletal injuries in the trucking industry commonly occur in arms, backs or necks—most of them are sprains and strains. Consider the following repetitive movement examples and their impact:

- Sitting for long hours in a cab can strain your back.
- Operating pedals on the floor can increase the wear and stress on your knees and ankles.
- Gripping the steering wheel for long hours can lead to tendonitis or carpal tunnel syndrome.
- Turning your head to check mirrors and identify hazards can injure your neck's muscles and joints.
- Getting in and out of your truck's cab or loading cargo can be a repetitive movement that leads to "trucker shoulder," a series of musculoskeletal issues involving your shoulder's tendons and ligaments.

While these conditions often arise slowly, they can seriously impact your ability to perform your work. And that pain or injury can also carry over and impact your life outside of work. Sitting in your truck isn't the same as sitting in a chair, so consider the following ergonomic tips to lower your chances of developing work-related MSDs:

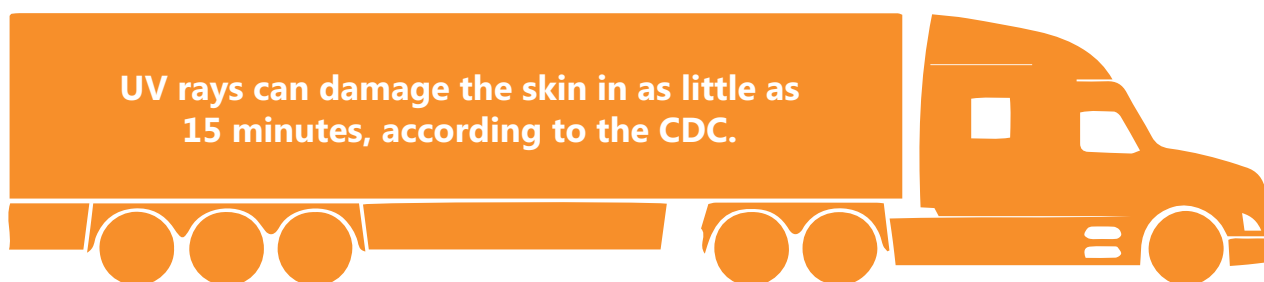
- **Check your seat.** Opt for a seat cushion with lumbar support to improve your driving experience significantly. It's also important to check that your seat suspension is not too soft.
- **Adjust the backrest.** Make sure your arms are at a slight angle while you're holding the steering wheel. Try to keep your elbows tucked in.
- **Sit properly.** Sit comfortably close to the wheel to create less shoulder strain during regular and emergency steering action. Ensure your thighs are entirely on the seat, and keep the back of your knee about one inch away from the seat cushion.
- **Fine-tune the lumbar support.** Fill the lumbar support to meet your back to provide a firm, comfortable level of support, minimize slouching and reduce exposure to vibration. Be careful not to overfill the lumbar bladder as it could cause rounding of your spine.
- **Pay attention to your posture.** Ensure your entire back—from shoulders to bottom—leans against the backrest and that your bottom is at the very back of the seat. Keeping your seat high can help discourage slouching.
- **Adjust your position.** It's important not to sit still, so adjust your position in the seat periodically to relieve spine pressure. Even a tiny adjustment helps.

## Skin Safety

Sun exposure adds up when you spend most of your day on the road. Even when sitting in a truck's cab, you are exposed to both types of ultraviolet (UV) radiation, UVA and UVB rays. While a vehicle's windshield may lessen the UVB rays that enter the cab, side windows typically don't. And in general, glass does not protect against UVA rays. You also risk sun exposure when loading your trailer, washing your rig or stopping for a meal or break.

Here are some sun protection tips to consider when getting ready for or while on your route:

- **Wear sunscreen daily.** Consider a broad-spectrum sunscreen with a sun protection factor within the range of 30 to 50. A water-resistant sunscreen will also keep you protected while sweating.
- **Be mindful of peak hours.** The sun tends to be the strongest between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. While these may be prime driving hours, it's essential to take extra precautions midday.
- **Adjust your wardrobe.** Wear clothes and hats that shield your skin and provide extra coverage to your arms, legs, face and neck. Choose dark (e.g., black, brown and navy) or bright (e.g., red and neon green) colors and densely woven cloth, like denim or synthetic fabrics. Pay special attention to the left side of your body, which faces the window most of the time.
- **Wear quality sunglasses.** Invest in high-quality sunglasses labeled to block both UVA and UVB rays. Wraparound sunglasses provide the best protection for your eyes and the skin on your face.
- **Screen yourself regularly.** Early detection of skin conditions is critical to treatment options. Be mindful of any discoloration or changes to the skin, and discuss them with your doctor.



UV rays can damage the skin in as little as  
15 minutes, according to the CDC.

## Mental Health

Much of your workday focuses on routines and strict industry regulations, which can be stressful and thus take a toll on your mental health. While some work stressors may be out of your control, you can manage some parts of the day. Consider the following tips for managing your mental health while working:

- **Give yourself extra time.** When traveling new or familiar routes, it's always best to leave some extra time (e.g., an hour or two) for the unexpected. Traffic, bad weather or an accidental wrong turn can add a lot of extra miles—and stress—to your trip.
- **Schedule time to recharge.** It's critical to dedicate quality time toward sleep and rest at the end of the day. Taking care of yourself on the road is crucial and includes time to recharge. In this high-functioning role, you need all the brainpower you can get—which starts with getting quality rest. Make the most of your downtime with quality rest and a good diet.
- **Get outside when possible.** You can make the most of your breaks and build in time for exercise or fresh air to clear your mind before getting back behind the wheel.
- **Maintain a positive outlook.** When it's just you and your thoughts while driving, it's easy to ponder the past or worry about the future. It's important to focus on what you can control at that moment—for example, delivering goods or reaching your destination on time. Be mindful of the situations or topics that cause stress, and do your best to avoid them. If you're having a rough day, remember that tomorrow is a new day.
- **Bring some comforts from home.** Although a truck cab can be small, make room for comforting reminders of home (e.g., photos and knick-knacks).
- **Stay connected.** Don't neglect your connections with family and friends while away from home. A strong network is important for your mental health, so find ways to check in and feel supported as you rack up road miles.





## Summary

Your overall health and wellness can be critical to staying on schedule and safe behind the wheel. Much of your day can be spent sedentary in the cab and involve repetitive movements and limited food options. However, being on the road doesn't need to be detrimental to your health; you can take preventive measures and plan for healthy choices during the workday. You can be in control of healthy food, exercise and other lifestyle choices while on the road.

Whether you're a local, regional or long-distance driver, take full advantage of required breaks for a mental and physical recharge. Your workday can have short- and long-term effects on your overall well-being, so building rest, a healthy diet and movement into your daily routine is essential.

Keep in mind that this guide only covers general wellness tips. Medical conditions, dietary restrictions and physical activities will vary by person, so discussing your unique needs with a doctor is important. They can help you identify healthy behaviors and choices that fit your trucking schedule. Additionally, talk to your supervisor if you have questions or concerns about your health and wellness while working.