



# VITALS

A Weekly Safety Newsletter For Medical Transport Professionals

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## Fall Driving Most Hazardous

It's been thought that because people drink more alcohol and engage in more leisure driving during the summer that it is the most dangerous driving season. Others might have thought that winter driving is more dangerous due to road conditions. Michael Sivak at the University of Michigan has disabused us of those notions.

Sivak used the fatality data and the distance driven data from the Department of Transportation (DOT) to calculate the fatality rate per distance driven for each month from 1994 to 2006. He found that October, November and December have the highest fatality rates. The rates increase from March to October and decline from October to March, despite the nastiness of winter weather.

The risk of a fatality per distance is 16% greater in October than in March. One would think that the ice and snow of winter would make the winter months more dangerous. Conversely, there is a strong seasonal variation in beer consumption. Beer drinking peaks in the summer months. Naturally, this data does not suggest that we don't need to take winter weather into consideration or that it's okay to drink beer and drive. These are recognized risk factors. We are aware of them and know how to deal with them. Are their autumnal risk factors that are unrecognized?

One possible risk factor, according to Sivak, could be the duration of darkness. It increases in late fall and is longest by the end of December. Do you think more accidents occur in the dark during the fall than in the rest of the year? Do you think that ending daylight savings time might be a factor? Do you drive less safely if it's dark when you get to work and dark when you leave? If duration of darkness was the primary factor, wouldn't December, the darkest month, have the highest fatality per distance driven? Sivak states there are multiple factors, which remain to be scientifically validated.

I have a completely un-scientific thought, not even an opinion, just a thought. If we consider driving a behavior, it might be reasonable to look at what might cause "Octoberfrets." Maybe in October the anticipatory stress of the Holiday Season begins in earnest. Will I have enough money? Am I off on Christmas? Which of my family will I get to see? Which of my extended family will I be forced to see? Does this create an increase in our level of background stress? Another contributor may be a fall-onset type of depression, also called winter depression, or Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).



Consider the common signs and symptoms of SAD: increased sleep, increased appetite with carbohydrate craving, weight gain, irritability, interpersonal difficulties (especially rejection sensitivity), and leaden paralysis (a heavy feeling in the arms or legs). It's estimated that 4%-6% of the general population experience SAD and another 10%-20% have subsyndromal features. The average age of onset of SAD is about 23. The risk of SAD decreases with age. SAD is treated with light box therapy, drugs and psychotherapy.

Beckham in his *Handbook of Depression* argues that there are seasonal variations in mood and behavior in the general population. He contends that this diminishes the likelihood that SAD is a distinct clinical disorder. Either way works for me. If SAD affects a distinct population or occurs more generally, it could be a factor in the quality of our driving.

Don't get SAD. Avoid the "Octoberfrets". Wouldn't it be wonderful if fewer people were killed in October, November and December, because we all took the time to care for our biologic needs responsibly, appreciated the good things and wonderful people in our lives, and, gave ourselves and the public the gift of safe driving?