



📷 Victoria's road toll is 23, compared with 34 at this time last year. Picture: Nicole Garmston

VIC News

Victoria's radical new driving test will target tired drivers in bid to tackle road toll

Brigid O'Connell, Health reporter, Herald Sun

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A ROADSIDE test for fatigue could join the alcohol breath-test and the saliva swab for drugs as a weapon in Victoria Police’s road safety arsenal.

Fatigue is a factor in up to a third of serious traffic accidents in Victoria, killing about 50 people and seriously injuring about 300 more each year.

So finding a way to keep tired drivers off the road could be the new road safety frontier.

Until recently, all that could be done was to advise sleepy drivers to take a powernap, as there was no way to scientifically determine whether a motorist was too tired to drive.

But by tracking eye movements, including the duration of blinks and how eyes scan the road, driver fatigue levels can now be measured.

Police may soon be able to ask drivers to step into a police van, just as for impairment or drug tests, and take a fatigue test on a camera-based device.

Victoria Police and the Transport Accident Commission support the concept, and say they are watching closely.

Melbourne sleep researchers are now developing an on-the-spot version of “smart-glasses” technology they have tested in the laboratory and in off-road driving simulations.

Austin Health Associate Professor Mark Howard, a respiratory and sleep specialist who is the lead researcher, said drivers often failed to realise they were too tired to drive, or that it was a serious problem.

“People have run off the road, hit a tree, and nearly killed themselves,” Prof Howard said.



📷 Fatigue is a factor in up to a third of serious traffic accidents in Victoria. Picture: Bill Hearne

“You’ll ask them: ‘Were you tired?’ They’ll say, ‘no’.

“Then you’ll ask: ‘Did you wind the window down?’ They’ll say: ‘Yeah, and I also turned the radio up to help keep me alert — but I wasn’t tired,’” he said.

“People can have poor awareness,” Prof Howard said.

Victoria Police’s Julie-Anne Newman said the force had been approached to be involved in roadside testing research, and would watch its development “with interest”.

The Sleep Health Foundation’s annual report, out this week, showed almost 30 per cent of adults drove while drowsy at least monthly, and 20 per cent had fallen asleep at the wheel.

Prof Howard’s team studied drowsiness in night-shift workers during driving tests, and

found a tenfold increase in “microsleeps”, and double the number of lane crossings. Drivers also struggled to keep their eyes open and were less able to stay in the middle of the road.

Prof Howard said the challenge lay in translating technology calibrated for each driver to a one-size-fits-all test: “With drug and alcohol testing, you’re trying to change driver behaviour. You don’t need to detect everyone — just the tip-of-the-iceberg people who are very impaired.

“Education, with measurement and enforcement, creates the behaviour change,” he said.

The project is a collaboration between Austin Health, the Institute for Breathing and Sleep, Monash University, and the Co-operative Research Centre for Alertness, Safety and Productivity.

TAC’s senior manager for road safety Samantha Cockfield said its public message was shifting away from a consideration of fatigue on only long trips, as new research found drivers could be drowsy and impaired at any time.

She said: “There are two key groups at risk: shift workers, who often get poor sleep and drive when others are sleeping; and mums, who get up for their children in the night and are up early to get the kids to school.”

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