

A McMaster PhD candidate has found that caffeine consumption, rather than loud music, is the best way to fight driver fatigue.

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Think double-double, not Drake, if you're tired behind the wheel

By Matt Terry

If you're feeling tired behind the wheel, you're better off reaching for a cup of coffee or tea than you are turning up your favourite song.

That's according to mechanical engineering PhD candidate ShiXu Liu, who found that of the two most popular techniques for fighting driver fatigue, caffeine was more effective.

"Both caffeine and music keep drivers feeling more awake, but caffeine also helps them maintain good driving performance," says Liu.

He says that's because loud music can actually distract drivers rather than keep them alert.

Liu put research participants through three 120-minute simulated driving sessions using computer software and a steering wheel gaming controller. He then asked them to score their fatigue levels.

Those who had consumed caffeine performed significantly better than those who listened to music.

"Caffeine stimulates the central nervous system," says Liu. "It not only helps you feel better, but helps you maintain high levels of alertness, and reduces the chance that you'll fall asleep."

Music, he says, reduces boredom and makes you feel less tired, but distracts drivers from their main task.

He adds that driver fatigue presents a challenge that other dangerous driving practices don't, in that it's all but invisible.

"We can test for alcohol consumption, we can see someone using a cell phone and stop them, but we can't see fatigue," says Liu. "If someone is tired enough to fall asleep behind the wheel, it's already too late. That's why we want to provide drivers with actions they can take to stay safe."

Of course, it's recommended that you don't drive at all if you're too tired.

Liu presented the findings at the annual meeting of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society in Chicago recently.

