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Types of Truck Accidents

By Michael Monheit, Esquire, Monheit Law, PC

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Here are the most common types of truck accidents:

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Truck Brakes Malfunction

Heavy trucks use air brakes exclusively: Most are drum-like units. Air enters the chamber when the brakes are applied, the push rod moves out turning the slack adjuster which rotates the S-cam and forces the shoes into the drum.

Brakes are a heat engine, they convert kinetic energy or motion into thermal energy or heat. Suppose a 400-horsepower engine grosses out at 80,000 pounds. The engine can probably get up to 40 mph in 1/4 mile or 1,320 feet. The brakes should be able to stop in about 133 feet with this speed and weight.

A full stop from 60 mph might raise the drum temperatures to 600 degrees F. This is about the limit for safe operation. If the brakes aren't right or the load is not distributed properly, then some drums might go up to 800-1,000 degrees F. The drum will increase in diameter as the temperature rises. This is definitely dangerous for the truck driver and the passenger vehicles around the truck.

Downhill Break Failure

Some truck drivers don't understand the severe demands put on the brakes by long downhill runs. Brakes had better be right used with the correct braking technique for optimum safety to the bottom. In recent years there had been erroneous information about how to brake on long down hills. It was wrongly suggested that a continuous application of the brakes was the preferred method. However, that is incorrect. Intermittent application or what the trucking industry refers to as snubbing is the preferred method.

The key is not the speed drop; this will depend on weight, grade, and other factors. The key is air pressure -- the application pressure should be high enough to get all the truck brakes working. In practice, unless the brakes are in good condition, tractor-trailer balance is right, and the load is ideally located; the continuous application of the brakes is likely to result in uneven drum and lining temperatures and problems before you get to

the bottom of the hill.

Downhill break failure can be prevented when all the brakes are working some of the time instead of some of the brakes working all the time. The application pressure must be high enough to ensure that all brake chambers apply and that all linings make solid contact with the drums - about 20 psi or higher.

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Truck rollovers

Big rigs roll easily. If a truck goes around a curve too fast, it will roll over. Trucks can go over in a curve even without going too fast if their rear tires strike something (like the curb) while cornering. Trucks can still roll over at 5 mph especially if backing up while being jackknifed. Some rollovers happen when drivers try to return to the road after putting a tire off the pavement. They can rut in soft ground or catch a pavement separation and roll over.

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Truck Jackknifing

The rig jackknifes when the drive axle brakes lock up. Steering axle brakes provide 12 percent of the total braking of a loaded vehicle. Trucks jackknife sooner or later regardless of what the steering axle does even if the steering wheels are pointed straight ahead. Road crown or left/right imbalances will cause jackknifing if the truck slides long enough. Jackknifing will most likely cause a rollover.

Once the brakes are locked, directional control at the axle becomes lost. Sooner or later a sideways pull develops that affects the directional stability of the vehicle which may cause a rollover.

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Never attempt to negotiate on your own behalf with a trucking company after a truck accident. Most trucking companies are highly skilled at truck accident investigation and claims practice. These adjusters represent the truck company -- not you. Never make any statements or sign any releases for medical records or employment records. Often the medical release allows the adjuster to talk to the doctors without you or anyone being present.

Truck companies have accident investigators that are on call and dispatched to the scene of the crash as soon as the trucking company learns about an accident. While the families of the accident victims are tending to medical and hospital care and funeral arraignments, the trucking company is busy investigating the accident and gearing up their defense. This is why victims of large truck accidents need a knowledgeable team of truck accident attorneys and investigators on their side...fighting for their rights.

Heavy Truck Accidents and Unnecessary Deaths and Serious Injuries

By <http://www.monheit.com/truck/20041205102621.html>

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How common are injuries from heavy truck accidents?

An accident involving a heavy truck, 18-wheeler, semi, big tractor-trailer truck, often results in death or serious injury. The statistics are shocking. Over 1 million people were involved in nearly 500,000 large truck related accidents in 1999. That resulted in over 5,000 deaths and over 140,000 injuries. Of those injuries from heavy truck accidents, 10's of thousands involved severe brain damage or the loss of limb. Some trucks weigh over 100,000 lbs when fully loaded. Unloaded, they still weigh over 10,000 lbs. That is 5-10 times the weight of a car.

This problem of heavy truck accidents has been around for years, and the data is consistent over time. For example, according to the Safety Board analysis of Fatal Accident Reporting System (FARS), in 1993 there were 3,311 heavy trucks involved in 3,169 fatal accidents, in which 3,783 persons died. The FARS report shows that heavy truck accidents are often caused by truckdriver fatigue. In fact, as many as 30 to 40 percent of all heavy truck accidents are caused by fatigue of the driver.

What is the cost to society of heavy truck accidents?

Injuries and fatalities are not the only toll inflicted by heavy truck crashes. For example, the financial toll that goes along with such crashes impacts commerce, costs of insurance, costs of health care, and costs of good. The NTSB reports that the actual cost of all heavy truck accidents in 1999 was \$34 billion.

What is the most likely cause of heavy truck accidents?

The NTSB said, "Because of the significant number of heavy truck-related fatalities and the significant role of fatigue in such accidents, the Board initiated this study of single-vehicle heavy truck accidents to examine the role of specific factors, such as drivers' patterns of duty and sleep, in fatigue-related heavy truck accidents and to determine potential remedial actions. The purpose of the Board's study was to examine the factors that affect driver fatigue and not the statistical incidence of fatigue. Therefore, the Board specifically selected truck accidents that were likely to include fatigue-related accidents; that is, single-vehicle accidents that tend to occur at night. The Board desired to obtain approximately an equal number of fatigue-related and nonfatigue-related accidents through its notification process."
The most common causes of heavy trucks accidents are:

speeding,
running off the road
travel out lane
failure to yield

But at the root of those causes of heavy truck accidents is often driver fatigue.

"The Safety Board investigated 113 single-vehicle heavy truck accidents in which the driver survived. However, because the 96-hour duty/sleep history that was required for the study was not available for 6 drivers, the 6 accidents in which these drivers were involved were not included in the study. The study, therefore, analyzes data from 107 single-vehicle heavy truck accidents."

Based on the results of the analysis, the NTSB determined that fatigue is a key factor in heavy truck accidents, that hours of service regulations are a key to preventing heavy truck accidents, that improved education of heavy-truck drivers is important in implementing improved safety about fatigue,

How is the cause of a heavy truck accident determined?

Inspect the heavy truck including mechanics, tires, brakes
Interview witnesses
Review police reports
Obtain weather report and determine driving conditions

What to do if you were in a heavy truck accident?

When a person is injured or killed in a heavy truck accident they may be able to hold the driver and heavy trucking company responsible, as well as the companies on whose behalf a delivery is being made. The damages may include:

Wrongful death
Physical pain and suffering, mental anguish and physical impairment;
Medical and hospital expenses
Wage loss and lost earning capacity

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