

Safety Advisory SA02/24

Fitness to drive: Bus and coach drivers¹

Safety message

Driver incapacitation has been a contributing factor in several significant bus and coach incidents in NSW within the last five years. All bus and coach drivers need to be fit when reporting for duty to ensure their safety and that of their passengers and other road users.

Bus and coach drivers and operators in NSW must notify Transport for NSW (TfNSW) within 48 hours of becoming aware of 'any apparent change in the physical or mental condition of a driver of a public passenger vehicle operated by the operator that may detrimentally affect the driver's ability to drive public passenger vehicles safely'.^{2,3}

Drivers who experience any illness and/or symptoms, that may affect safe operation of their vehicle during driving operations, should safely stop the vehicle and report to their company, seeking medical attention if required.

Drivers can use a simple method such as the 'I'm Safe' checklist to gauge if they are fit for work. This involves asking the following questions (Figure 1):

Figure 1: I'm Safe driver checklist example

'Fitness for work' means: being able to answer 'yes' to ALL of the 'I'm Safe' questions.		
I llness	.....	Am I physically well?
M edication	.....	Am I free from the effects of medication?
S tress	.....	Am I free from significant stress?
A lcohol	.....	Am I free from the effects of alcohol and drugs?
F atigue	.....	Have I had enough rest?
E ating	.....	Have I eaten properly?

Source: former NSW State Transit Authority

¹ This Safety Advisory supersedes SA06/23, issued on 11 August 2023

² Passenger Transport (General) Regulation 2017 [NSW], Part 2, Division 4, Section 24 'Operators to notify detrimental change in driver's medical condition' and Part 4, Section 47 'Medical condition of drivers'

³ https://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/system/files/media/documents/2023/Fact-Sheet_NSW-Fitness-to-Drive-medical-assessment-for-bus-drivers.pdf

Background

Bus and coach drivers need good vision, physical ability, and cognitive capacity to undertake the complex task of driving a heavy vehicle.

As documented by Austroads,⁴ driving any motor vehicle requires:

- constant attention
- good judgement
- appropriate responsiveness
- reasonable physical capability.

All of these can be affected by the driver's physical and psychological health. Commercial vehicle driving involves additional demands due to factors such as the vehicle itself (size, load etc), the responsibility for passengers, operating environment, and work schedule demands. For bus and coach drivers, your health is therefore important for public safety and for your own safety on the road.

Examples of significant bus driver incapacitation incidents in NSW

There have been several significant bus and coach incidents in NSW, within the last five years, in which driver incapacitation was a contributing factor.

Campsie, 20 March 2024

On 20 March 2024, bus m/o1531 was undertaking a scheduled passenger service when the driver missed a route turn and continued through an intersection onto Seventh Avenue, Campsie. The bus then collided with the rear of bus m/o9982, which was travelling ahead. Several vehicles parked on the side of the road were also impacted in the collision.

The driver of m/o1531 sustained serious injuries in the collision, and passengers of both buses, and the driver of m/o9982, also sustained injuries requiring medical treatment.

OTSI's investigation⁵ into the incident identified that the driver of bus m/o1531 likely experienced a sudden incapacitation event, which resulted in the driver losing effective control over the vehicle through a loss of gross and fine motor skills. This likely incapacitation resulted in reduced physical and cognitive ability to operate the bus safely. The mechanisms behind the likely driver incapacitation event could not be determined.

Drummoyne, 22 June 2023

On 22 June 2023, bus 2998ST was travelling on Victoria Road at Drummoyne in Sydney's Inner West when the vehicle started to veer across the road. The bus struck and mounted the concrete divider and collided with an oncoming utility. The utility driver attempted to swerve away but their vehicle was struck on the rear right panel. Several cars were on the road at the time but were able to evade the out-of-control bus.

A review of CCTV footage revealed that the driver had suffered a medical episode which resulted in an incapacitation lasting approximately 45 seconds. The 14 passengers on board were shaken but not seriously injured.

⁴ <https://austroads.com.au/drivers-and-vehicles/assessing-fitness-to-drive/for-commercial-drivers/frequently-asked-questions>

⁵ Investigation report is available at www.otsi.nsw.gov.au

Cordeaux Heights, 4 January 2021

On Monday 4 January 2021, the driver of bus 4758MO, suffered an incapacitating medical episode. As a result, the bus rolled uncontrollably in a reverse direction down South Road, Cordeaux Heights. The bus struck several parked vehicles and damaged infrastructure along South Road, before coming to rest against the front of a domestic residence. The driver had experienced an incapacitation event while driving, because of a medical condition of which they were unaware.

This incident resulted in the commencement of the OTSI bus and coach rollaways systemic investigation, which is ongoing at the time of publication of this Safety Advisory.

Adamstown, 5 November 2019⁶

On 5 November 2019, a pedestrian waiting at a level crossing on Brunner Road, at Adamstown in Newcastle, was struck and fatally injured after a bus driver experienced a medical episode. The bus veered across the road onto the side of oncoming traffic, struck the pedestrian, then continued to swerve and hit several parked cars before the driver regained consciousness and brought the bus to a stop. The bus was transporting school children, with some sustaining minor physical injuries.

The driver was aware of feeling unwell but did not anticipate becoming incapacitated and unable to stop the bus.

Key points

Bus and coach operators

- Ensure that you have developed and implemented effective systems and procedures to provide assurance that the health of transport safety employees is monitored and managed on a pro-active and regular basis.
- Ensure that you have developed and implemented practicable procedures to manage the onset of illness which may impact on fitness for duty, including appropriate 'triggering' of health assessments and return to work program.
- Ensure that you have in place effective audit and assurance systems to provide verification that your health systems are operating as intended.
- Promote a safe working environment which provides support for employees and encourages self-reporting.

Bus and coach drivers

- Seek medical diagnosis and treatment for symptoms/illnesses/conditions that may impair your ability to safely operate a vehicle.
- Ensure that your treating doctor is aware of your role as a driver of a heavy public passenger vehicle, so that potential adverse effects of illness/medical conditions and prescribed medications can be effectively considered by your medical practitioner/s.
- Be vigilant to identify adverse changes in your health. If driving and feeling unwell, stop your bus, report to your company and seek medical attention, if required.

For further information contact: engagement@otsi.nsw.gov.au

⁶ <https://www.otsi.nsw.gov.au/documents/bus-safety-investigation-bus-and-pedestrian-fatal-accident-brunner-road-adamstown-05-november-2019>