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## Driving dangers you may not be aware of

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I don't need to tell you that driving in Kuwait is dangerous--for a whole host of reasons that I won't go into. But what if I told you that you may be jeopardizing your health, even when you are the only car on the road, driving carefully, at a safe speed, and wearing your seatbelt?

Many people are completely oblivious to the fact that the way they sit and hold the steering wheel has a direct effect on the stress they place on their bodies. Let's take a close look at some of the most common driving "postures" and the kind of strain they put on the body. For this exercise, imagine that the steering wheel is a clock and the different hand positions described below are the hour hands on the clock. Which type of driver are you?

**"The Easy Rider"**: the left hand holds the wheel at 11 o'clock with the elbow resting on the window ledge. This posture places the shoulder, elbow and wrist at risk for injury. The shoulder is held in an upward and rotated position that places direct pressure on the rotator cuff. Prolonged pressure (anything longer than five minutes) on the rotator cuff leads to inflammation and shoulder pain--now consider how long you drive with your arm in that position! With the elbow resting directly on the ledge you are placing yourself at risk for possible compression of the nerve that wraps around the inside of the elbow, which is not very deep or protected, and is therefore easily irritated. Ever hit your funny bone? If you develop hand tingling or numbness in this position, it is a sign that you are compressing the nerve and it would be a good idea to change your arm position. The last thing that can become irritated in this position is the wrist. With just one hand on the steering wheel, it has to grip a lot firmer to maintain control of the vehicle, which can lead to inflammation of the tendons in the wrist and possible carpal tunnel syndrome.

**"The Eager Beaver"**: these drivers have good hand position on the wheel (ten o'clock and two o'clock) but they have pulled themselves forward off the back of the seat, as if they are trying to do a sit up/pull up. At first, these drivers appear to have incredible posture they are not actually using their back support. Unfortunately their back muscles and arms have to work overtime to maintain this posture. If you're this kind of driver, try relaxing back into the seat to give your back the support it needs. If you feel you are too far back and the seat cannot slide any closer then place a

pillow behind your back for support. A full, length lumbar support might also be an option to fill the gap.

**"The Side Sloucher":** Some drivers lean into the center of the car, resting on the console, often just using the left hand to hold the wheel, probably at about six o'clock. This places the spine in a shifted position, instead of the recommended straight and supported back while driving. Maintaining a crooked posture will promote muscle imbalances that make the back weak and tight. For any one with back problems I usually recommend using a lumbar roll while driving. A lumbar roll is placed across the small of the back and helps to support and maintain the spine's natural curves.

**"The Pigeon":** Driving without using your headrest is another common mistake. A lot of cars do not actually have an optimal headrest; they either push the head too far forward or cause you to tip too far back. A common mistake is to sit with what we call a forward head position--like a pigeon jutting its beak out when it walks. This places extra stress on the neck and upper back. Try resting your head back on the headrest- your chin should still be parallel with the floor.

Here's a little trick to monitor your upright driving posture. Sit up very tall and adjust the rearview mirror so you can just see out the back. Once you start driving, every time you look in the rear view mirror, you will have feedback on whether you have slouched or maintained the upright posture. As for your legs and feet, the recommended leg position is to have the heel placed where you can pivot the foot easily between the gas and the brake. If you have a knee or hip problem you may want to temporarily modify this position. Try keeping the hip, knee and foot in a straight line with the gas pedal. This minimizes the stress placed on the inside of the knee and the rotation through the hip.

We have enough stress with driving, why add more unnecessary stress with awkward driving postures?

For further information on this topic please contact the Fawzia Sultan Rehabilitation Institute (FSRI) in Hawally at 264-2862, or check out our website at [www.rehabinstitutekuwait.com](http://www.rehabinstitutekuwait.com)

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