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## Wake-Up Call

Ambien users are reporting bizarre nighttime behavior after taking aid. How will the claims affect Sanofi-Aventis's bottom line?

### WEB EXCLUSIVE

By Jennifer Barrett and Anne Underwood  
Newsweek

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March 16, 2006 - Lori Cox didn't remember ordering the ring she had just got in the mail. But her phone records said otherwise, showing she'd made a middle-of-the-night call to a home-shopping channel. Even worse, she also discovered she'd made cell-phone calls to her ex-boyfriend in her sleep. And a few times, she woke up to find empty beer bottles and cracker crumbs in her kitchen—evidence of predawn snacks she didn't remember eating. "It's scary," she says. "One side of your brain is asleep and the other side is directing you into this secret life."

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What caused the odd behavior? Cox believes she has found the answer: Ambien. Cox began taking the sleep medication a year ago, after a



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traumatic breakup with her longtime boyfriend kept her awake at night. Until recently, Cox thought she was alone with her odd nocturnal habits. But recent weeks have seen a spate of reports about patients blaming strange behavior on America's most popular sleep aid. Some patients drove in their sleep and ended up in accidents with no recollection of them the next morning. Others report eating or, like Cox, shopping in their sleep after taking the drug. Earlier this month, after interviewing a number of patients across the nation, New York City attorney Susan Chana Lask filed a class-action complaint citing clients who'd driven, shoplifted and feasted on raw eggs and uncooked vegetables in their sleep after taking Ambien. In the most serious case, a New York lab technician was actually assaulted twice after taking Ambien when she opened her door for a stranger—something she says she never would have done had she been conscious of her actions. Lask says she has now been contacted by about 200 others who've experienced similar effects, and expects more reports to come. Even if only 1 percent of those who take the popular sleep drug experience such side effects, she tells NEWSWEEK, "One percent of 26 million prescriptions is a lot."

Sanofi-Aventis, the maker of Ambien, is defending its drug. The French-based pharmaceutical company issued a statement stressing that such side effects are rare and that—when taken as prescribed—the sleep aid is a "safe and effective" treatment for insomnia. Company spokeswoman Melissa Feltmann emphasizes that while sleepwalking is a possible but uncommon side effect of Ambien, some of the reported cases might not necessarily be caused by the drug. (In approving Ambien and another popular sleep aid, Sonata, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration [FDA] cautioned that they be used only for short periods—usually no more than a week to 10 days—because longer-term studies of their safety and effectiveness have not been done.)

Bad publicity, however, inevitably comes at a price, and one question now is how much it will affect the pharmaceutical company's bottom line. Some analysts believe that as long as the side effects are not perceived as dangerous, and are restricted to a small group of users, the drug will still remain popular. But if the negative reports discourage others from taking Ambien—or the side effects lead to more serious incidents—the effect could be much worse for Sanofi-Aventis. "The litmus test is how far these cases go," says brand consultant

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Alycia de Mesa. "If it becomes worse in terms of more people experiencing these side effects or if someone shoots someone and then says they were on Ambien, that will really backfire on the brand."

So far, though, the news seems to have had minimal effect on the company's share price. In the past week, it's actually climbed from about \$43 to \$45 a share. And analysts don't seem too worried. "I'm not convinced this has a big impact on sentiment," says Paul Mann, an analyst at Deutsche Bank. "If the class-action lawsuit were in the thousands, that might be different. But we're not talking about deaths here. I don't think they're looking at that kind of liability."

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