

Like Alcohol, Drugs Can Impair Driving Ability

Recognizing that the beginning of December kicks off a month-long season of celebrations and social gatherings, every President since 1981 has named December National Drugged and Drunk Driving month. This designation is meant to remind people to drive responsibly and to be mindful of the dangers of mixing drugs (including alcohol) and driving a motor vehicle.

Although the dangers of drinking and driving have been publicized for years, the role of drugs in motor vehicle accidents only recently has been emphasized. When misused, both alcohol and drugs can impair driving ability, increasing the potential for death and injury for both the user and the people around him or her. The National Health Museum points out that every 30 minutes, someone dies at the hands of an impaired driver, adding up to nearly 50 people each day. It is believed that drugs other than alcohol are involved in 18-22% of motor vehicle deaths. Yet, driving while impaired is the most frequently committed crime in America, according to America's Health Insurance Plan. The National Household Survey on Drug Abuse found over 8 million persons over age 12 reported driving under the influence of illegal drugs in 2001 in the U.S.

Unfortunately, when an erratic driver is stopped by the police, impairment caused by drugs cannot be revealed by breathalyzer tests. Further, young people in particular are apt to use drugs recreationally because they are easier to hide than alcohol, and easier to acquire given the stepped-up enforcement of laws prohibiting the sale of alcohol to underage persons.

Recent studies indicate that drugs may pose a bigger problem with regard to traffic accidents than had been thought previously. For example, the New England Journal of Medicine reports that a study of drivers without alcohol in their systems who were stopped for reckless driving revealed 45% had marijuana and 25% had cocaine in their systems. The Insurance Institute for Traffic Safety studied tractor-trailer drivers and found evidence of marijuana in 15% of the drivers, non-prescription stimulants in 12%, prescription stimulants in 5%, and cocaine in 2% of the drivers. In fact, stimulants comprised the most frequently identified drug class among fatally injured truck drivers. Despite these findings, very few states routinely test for illicit drug use in drivers, and the use of legal drugs adds to the complexity of the problem.

Like alcohol, both legal and illegal drugs alter perception, attention, judgment, coordination, and memory, and can result in blurred vision, dizziness, excitability, increased or decreased blood pressure, and sleepiness. Commonly used illegal drugs include

- marijuana, which leads to incoordination, impaired time and distance estimation, and increased reaction times,
- cocaine, which is related to poor impulse control, speeding, and inattentive driving,
- ecstasy, which creates a sense of detachment while increasing risky behavior,
- heroin, which leads to poor vehicle control by slowing responses to stimuli, delaying reactions, and can result in falling asleep at the wheel.

However, legal drugs, both prescription and over-the-counter, also adversely affect driving. Tranquilizers produce drowsiness, lack of coordination, altered perceptions, and slower reaction times. Muscle

relaxants have similar effects, and can cause confusion, disorientation, and inattentiveness. Cough suppressants, if used in excess, may cause drowsiness. Antihistamines impair tracking and reaction time so it becomes difficult to steer and stay in one's lane while driving. Stimulants and appetite suppressants can cause nervousness, disorientation, agitation, irrational or violent behavior--characteristics that are related to speeding and inattentive driving. Further, when the stimulants wear off, fatigue sets in. People who use legal drugs need to remember that mixing any type of drug with alcoholic beverages intensifies these effects.

When drugs are needed for therapeutic reasons, it is important to discuss all medication with your doctor or pharmacist to understand the side effects and to determine which drugs can be combined safely, especially when you intend to drive a motor vehicle. Never take more than the prescribed amount, and never use another person's prescription. Ask for non-sedating forms of medication if driving is necessary. And plan on a designated driver if you intend to consume alcohol at the upcoming holiday get-togethers.

Further information about drugged driving is available at the National Institute of Drug Abuse (www.nida.nih.gov), the Drug Enforcement Administration (www.dea.gov), and the National Health Museum (www.accessexcellence.org). Additional information about this or other public health concerns is available at the Central Connecticut Health District at 721-2822 (www.ccthd.org). The staff at the Central Connecticut Health District extends wishes for a safe holiday and a healthy new year.