

December is National Impaired Driving Prevention Month, a time to raise awareness about the consequences of driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs. A recent survey by the U.S. Department of Transportation found that 1 in 40 nighttime weekend drivers tested positive for a blood alcohol content (BAC) level of 0.08. The survey tested other drugs for the first time and found that 1 in 12 tested positive for marijuana. Data from published research finds that marijuana impairs motor coordination, reaction time, attentiveness, and perception of time and speed. Nine studies conducted over the past two decades on marijuana and car-crash risk concluded, "Drivers who test positive for marijuana or self-report using marijuana are more than twice as likely as other drivers to be involved in motor vehicle crashes." Illegal drugs, as well as prescription and over-the-counter medications, can be just as deadly as alcohol. The bottom line is - impaired is impaired.

According to the CDC, every day, almost 30 people in the United States die in motor vehicle crashes that involve an alcohol-impaired driver - one death every 51 minutes. Of the 1,168 traffic deaths among children ages 0 to 14 years in 2012, 239 (20%) involved an alcohol-impaired driver. Of those 239 child passengers, over half (124) were riding in the vehicle with the alcohol-impaired driver. Drugs other than alcohol (e.g., marijuana and cocaine) are involved in about 18% of motor vehicle driver deaths. These other drugs are often used in combination with alcohol.

At all levels of BAC, the risk of being involved in a crash is greater for young people than for older people. Among drivers with BAC levels of 0.08% or higher involved in fatal crashes in 2012, one out of every 3 were between 21 and 24 years of age (32%). The risks are even greater for teens, who, due to their inexperience, are already more likely to be involved in a crash. When this lack of experience is combined with the use of substances that may alter perception, cognition, and reaction time, the results can be tragic.

The statistics are alarming regarding drugged driving in teenagers. Among high school seniors in 2011, approximately 1 in 8 reported that in the two weeks prior to the survey, they had driven after smoking marijuana – more than the number that reported driving after consuming alcohol. Across age groups, the rate of driving under the influence of illicit drugs in 2011 was highest among young adults aged 18 to 25 at 11.6 percent.

Parents and other caring adults can play an important role in educating our youth about the dangers of impaired driving. Adults can also model good practices while driving, including designating a sober driver or making alternative transportation arrangements.

Let us resolve to do our part to keep our streets and highways safe. Together, we can save lives.

For more information, please visit our website at www.drugfreestuben.org.