



## TEEN DRINKING/DRUGGING AND DRIVING

### The Sobering Facts About Zero Tolerance (Alcohol)

To many young people, a driver's license is viewed as a symbol of independence and freedom.

However, the freedom a driver's license affords does not come without responsibilities. As drivers who are relatively new to the road, young adults under the age of 21 are still learning to negotiate roadways and become familiar with the general rules of the road. Adding alcohol to the mix only complicates the matter. When alcohol is introduced into the situation, it not only affects the judgment of a driver and his/her ability to react, but also leaves the driver open to potential injury, property damage and criminal repercussions that can result in the loss of driving privileges, fines and possible incarceration. In some cases, these penalties can be even tougher for young adults, because as drivers under the age of 21, they are not only breaking the law of driving while intoxicated, but also the law of underage drinking.<sup>1</sup>

Research has shown that young impaired drivers are involved in fatal crashes at approximately twice the rate of adult drivers, age 21 and over. Since 36% of all fatal crashes for underage drivers involve alcohol, it is imperative that young adults understand that the laws are not meant to single out and punish young people in particular, but rather to safeguard them against unsafe driving behaviors that threaten their well-being. The zero tolerance policy ensures that underage drivers will face severe penalties if they are caught drinking and driving. If they possess a Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) level over .00, .01 or .02, depending on the state, they will be found guilty of impaired driving. Zero tolerance laws provide for different policies regarding drivers under the age of 21 because of their increased crash level at low BAC levels.<sup>1</sup>

### What Is Impaired Driving and Who Is At Risk?

All drivers risk impairment when consuming alcohol or drugs – whether legal over-the-counter and prescription medications or illegal substances such as marijuana, cocaine, or other illicit drugs. There are three high-risk populations identified as most likely to drive while impaired:

- 21- to 34-year-olds
- underage drinkers between the ages of 15 and 20
- high BAC and repeat offenders<sup>1</sup>

### Facts About Drugged Driving

In 12 states (Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Utah, and Wisconsin), it is illegal to operate a motor vehicle with any detectable level of a prohibited drug, or its metabolites, in the driver's blood. Other state laws define "drugged driving" as driving when a drug "renders the driver incapable of driving safely," or causes the driver to be impaired." Driving under the influence of any drug that acts on the brain could impair one's motor skills, reaction time, and judgment. Drugged driving is a public health concern because it puts not only the driver at risk, but passengers and others who share the road.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, drugs other than alcohol that act on the brain, have increasingly been recognized as hazards to road traffic safety. Research examining these drugs indicates that marijuana is the most prevalent illegal drug detected in impaired drivers, fatally injured drivers, and motor vehicle crash victims. In a study conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, a moderate dose of marijuana alone was shown to

impair driving performance; however, the effects of even a low dose of marijuana combined with alcohol were markedly greater than for either drug alone.<sup>2</sup>

A variety of other drugs, such as benzodiazepines, cocaine, opiates, and amphetamines, have also been reported in fatal and nonfatal motor vehicle crashes.<sup>2</sup>

Drugs act on the brain and can alter perception, cognition, attention, balance, coordination, and other faculties required for safe driving. The effects of specific drugs of abuse differ depending on their mechanisms of action, the amount consumed, the history of the user, and other factors. In short, drugged driving is a dangerous activity that puts us all at risk.<sup>1</sup>

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reports that 16,000 people are killed annually due to drunk and drugged driving. Furthermore, NHTSA estimates that drugs are used by approximately 10 to 22% of drivers involved in crashes, often in combination with alcohol. According to the 2003 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, an estimated 10.9 million people reported driving under the influence of an illicit drug during the year prior to being surveyed. This corresponds to 4.8% of the population aged 15 or older, but 14.1% among young adults aged 18 to 25. In addition:

- Younger adult drivers were more likely to have driven under the influence of alcohol or illicit drugs than older adult drivers, with more than one in three drivers aged 21 to 25 (33.8%) and nearly one in four drivers aged 26 to 34 (24.3%) having driven under the influence of drugs or alcohol during the previous year. These percentages go down further in drivers over age 35.
- Male drivers were nearly twice as likely as female drivers to have driven under the influence of alcohol or drugs during the previous year (22% compared with 11.4%)<sup>1</sup>

A number of studies have examined illicit drug use in drivers involved in motor vehicle crashes, reckless driving, or in fatal accidents. For example:

- A recent study found that 34% of drivers admitted to a Maryland trauma center tested positive for drugs only, while 16% tested positive for alcohol only, 50% of those under 18 tested positive for alcohol and/or drugs.
- While it is interesting that more people in this study tested positive for drugs only, compared to alcohol only, it should be noted that this represents one geographic location, so findings cannot be generalized. In fact, many studies among similar populations have found higher prevalence rates of alcohol compared with drug use.
- Studies conducted in a number of localities have found that approximately 4 to 14% of drivers who sustained injury or death in traffic accidents tested positive for delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the active ingredient in marijuana.<sup>2</sup>

1National Highway Traffic Safety Administration 4/06 [www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov)

2 National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) InfoFacts: Drugged Driving, 8/25 [www.nida.nih.gov/Infofacts/driving](http://www.nida.nih.gov/Infofacts/driving)