

Drugs and driving

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Drug driving is on the increase. In 2001, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) conducted a research study into the incidence of drug and alcohol in road accident fatalities. The research showed that in fatal road accident casualties, between 1996 and 2000, there was a six-fold increase in the number of people who had traces of illegal drugs in their system, compared to an earlier study in 1985–87.

HOW DO DRUGS REDUCE DRIVING ABILITY?

● Drugs (whether illicit or medicinal) can impair driving ability. However, they can affect different people in different ways.

DEPRESSANTS such as alcohol, tranquillisers, heroin, methadone and solvents, slow down the central nervous system, affecting co-ordination and reaction times. This makes depressants use particularly dangerous while driving or operating machinery. Driving under the influence of depressants can:

- make it harder to concentrate
- reduce your ability to make quick and correct decisions
- reduce your ability to monitor things like speed, road signs and other drivers
- reduce your ability to respond appropriately to unexpected events, or the actions of other road users.

STIMULANTS such as amphetamines, ecstasy, cocaine and caffeine increase the heart rate, stimulate the brain and other areas of the central nervous system, and give the user a sense of increased alertness and energy. People using stimulants can become aggressive or disoriented. Driving after using stimulants can cause over confidence, so the user takes unnecessary risks.

HALLUCINOGENS such as LSD and 'magic mushrooms' change the way people feel and perceive their surroundings. They can enhance appreciation of sensory experiences but can also cause anxiety or paranoia. As they distort the user's sense of time and perception, these drugs would again be dangerous in driving. It has also been shown that the higher the concentration of THC in cannabis, the greater the deterioration in tracking performance.

Mixing drugs can also cause impairment. For example research has shown that the effects of taking cannabis together with alcohol (at a dose of just over half the UK legal limit) were greater than if cannabis had been taken alone.

DRIVING AND MEDICINES

Some medicines, including over-the-counter medicines, may cause drowsiness and other effects that could impair a motorist's ability to drive safely.

While the dangers of driving under the influence of prescription or over-the-counter medicines are just as great as for illicit drugs, there is little awareness of this fact in the UK. In 2001 there were 30 million prescriptions for anti depressants, but according to an RAC report only 59 per cent of motorists are aware that anti-depressants impair driving ability. For common over-the-counter products like hay fever medication, and cough medicine 'only 38 per cent and 36 per cent of motorists respectively, correctly believe these impair driving ability'. Medicines that may impair performance carry a warning on the label, but even if the labels were read, one quarter of motorists say they would disregard medicinal warnings against driving.

DRUG DRIVING AND THE LAW

It is illegal to drive a motor vehicle while 'unfit to drive through drink or drugs'.

● Drug driving is considered just as serious an offence as drink driving. Section 4 of Road Traffic Act 1988 states 'A person who, when driving or attempting to drive a motor vehicle on a road or a public place is unfit to drive through drink or drugs is guilty of an

offence' (Road Traffic Act 1988 (4))

● Driving under the influence of drugs carries a minimum 12-month disqualification from driving, a maximum fine of £5,000 and six months in jail. The penalties for drug driving are the same as for drink driving

● There is no distinction under the law between impairment due to illegal drugs and impairment due to medicinal drugs

● Police have the power to test drivers for alcohol or drugs after poor driving or after an accident but random stopping specifically for drug testing purposes is not permitted

● The legal limit for drink driving is 80 milligrams of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood (RTA 1988 (11)). This works out at about two and a half pints of normal strength beer or lager for an average weight man. It will be less for stronger beers or lagers and is usually less for women.

TESTING AND DRUG DRIVING

Whilst testing for alcohol is commonplace, testing for drugs is much rarer. The police can detain people who are suspected of being unfit to drive through the influence of drugs. In July 2003 the Railway and Transport Safety Act 2003 was passed. Chapter 20 gives police powers to use screening tests for drugs and says that a preliminary drug test may be given at the roadside or at a police station. A preliminary drug test is a procedure by which a specimen of sweat or saliva is obtained, but the equipment for performing these tests has not yet been approved.

Written by Melissa Lawes, information officer at DrugScope.

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factsheet