Soft Drug? Hard landing!

The holiday season is nearly upon us and with it comes the renewed focus on the risks and consequences of drinking and driving. We anticipate the return of familiar Road Safety campaigns. Local and provincial news sources report on the success that stricter rules have had on motorists who drink and drive. Tough penalties and warnings seem to be causing a noticeable change in people’s behavior. The roads are safer.

But are they?

What is not as widely publicized or spoken about is the fact that today’s drivers are now just as likely to consume drugs and drive as they would alcohol. The second most prevalent of these drugs is marijuana. With a reputation as a “soft drug” the dangers and risks involved in driving while under its influence are often underplayed, particularly by the young drivers most likely to engage in this behavior.

The numbers speak for themselves: Between 14 - 21% of youth in Grade 12 have reported driving within one hour of using cannabis, a rate that mirrors and exceeds the trend reported for driving after drinking in the same age group.

Media and pop culture fuel current youth attitudes and endorse the common public perception that marijuana is without its consequences and risks. There are many myths out there about driving high. Fortunately science has progressed far enough to provide us with a clear defense against the misinformation that plagues many public debates on this issue.

We can clearly say that consuming marijuana and then driving within the space of 2 hours or less will impact a drivers ability to perform divided attention tasks (such as steering, monitoring surrounding traffic, doing shoulder checks, changing lanes). And like most other drugs including alcohol, the effect intensifies with the amount consumed, previous history of use and individual metabolism. The effects of marijuana are even further intensified when it is consumed with alcohol.

Perhaps the most significant misconception is that there is no “breathalyzer” for marijuana, and therefore no way of being caught. This is no longer true. Roadside checks which routinely screen for alcohol are now often staffed by a Drug Recognition expert (DRE). Officers suspecting impairment of a driver can request a complete assessment that can include demands for saliva, blood tests, physical examinations and tests measuring divided attention capabilities. DRE assessments have been reported to be accurate in detecting the presence of recent drug use in the suspect driver with an accuracy rate of 93%.

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Driving on Marijuana? Prepare to be stopped...

The law in Canada doesn’t say drivers impaired by alcohol are subject to fines and prohibitions, it says that any driver demonstrating an impaired ability to operate a motor vehicle is subject to examination and application of the laws governing any motorized transport. Click here for full citation.

Unlike alcohol, there are currently no safe guidelines for consumption of marijuana to gauge levels of impairment related to safe use of a vehicle. Drivers who smoke marijuana are more than twice as likely to be involved in a crash, 30% more likely for that crash to be fatal, and more likely than drivers who are drinking, to involve another vehicle.

So here is the “ah-ha” moment: We are sitting in the same place today as were 20 years ago when in came to drunk driving. We have made significant progress in raising awareness and changing social norms around this issue. We can not as yet say the same for drug impaired driving.

Today we are just beginning the discussion on this issue. Don’t wait another 20 years and for someone else to experience firsthand the potentially devastating consequences of driving high.

Be proactive and speak clearly and honestly with your friends, family members and youth in your life. Being a responsible driver includes being responsible for knowing and sharing the best, most accurate information and leading by example.

Sites to check out:

Canadian Center on Substance Abuse - "Clearing the Smoke on Cannabis"
Barry King Lecture series - CCSA
Why Drive High?

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