

National Safe Driving Week is coming ? Drugs and driving is a deadly combination

The following article was submitted by the Canada Safety Council.

The holiday season brings with it familiar and necessary messages reminding Canadians to drive sober.

While impairment behind the wheel is most often associated with alcohol, motorists are also gambling with their safety and the safety of others by driving under the influence of drugs. These drugs include illegal substances, prescription medications and over-the-counter remedies.

‘Unfortunately, people are more afraid of being caught than being killed,’ said Canada Safety Council President Jack Smith. ‘They don’t think it’s going to happen to them until it happens.’

During National Safe Driving Week, which runs from Dec. 1 to 7, the Canada Safety Council will seek to educate Canadians that driving while under the influence of drugs is dangerous, irresponsible, illegal and becoming increasingly prevalent. It is posing a significant public safety risk that needs to be curbed through preventative measures, awareness and the enforcement of appropriate penalties.

Drugged driving facts

‘The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse reports that more than a third (35.3 per cent) of fatally injured drivers in Canada tested positive for impairing drugs in 2009. This compares with 40.9 per cent of driver fatalities in the same year where alcohol was the source of impairment. Simply put, drugged driving is just as deadly and prevalent as drunk driving. It is a serious problem that needs to be addressed.

‘Serious injury, driver or passenger death, hurting bystanders, destroying property, lost productivity and more strain on the health-care system: These are just some of the unfortunate, painful and yet totally preventable consequences of driving while impaired by drugs.

‘Drug-involved fatal crashes are more likely than alcohol-involved crashes to occur during the weekday daytime hours.

‘Drugs are impairing because they reduce drivers’ reaction times and their attention to the task of driving.

‘Impaired driving is an offence under the Criminal Code of Canada. Most jurisdictions also have sanctions under highway traffic acts. In 2011, more than 90,000 impaired driving charges were laid in Canada. This number, however, represents only a fraction of the impaired drivers on the roads.

‘There is a growing body of drug recognition experts (DRE) in Canada, who work to enforce penalties for driving under the influence of drugs. In cases where impairment by drugs is suspected, sobriety tests are being used to check for the source of impairment. A DRE can be called in to access the condition of a suspected impaired driver and may collect or arrange to collect a swab, urine or blood sample. If the results come back positive for the suspected drug or drugs, charges can be laid under the Criminal Code of Canada.

‘Female drivers are almost equally likely as males to test positive for drugs.

‘Driving after cannabis use is more commonplace among those aged 15 to 24 than drinking and driving, according to a 2013 report by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. In that age group, 12.6 per cent surveyed admitted to driving after cannabis use; this compares to 10.7 per cent who drove after drinking.

‘Young drivers between 16 and 24 lead the way in fatalities that involved alcohol and/or drugs. According to statistics from the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, 27.6 per cent of fatalities among this age group were impaired by alcohol. Compare this with 26.9 per cent of fatalities who were impaired by drugs. Aware of licensing restrictions and initiatives that catch and punish drunk drivers, some people are turning from alcohol to substances such as drugs to achieve a high. But as the statistics indicate, the outcomes are even more, not less, dangerous and deadly.

‘Among fatally injured drivers 55 and older, drug use is more prevalent than alcohol.

‘The most common drugs found in fatalities are central nervous system depressants, cannabis, stimulants and narcotics.

Recommendations

Be proactive and stop drugged driving before it happens.

‘Be responsible. Never drive when impaired.

‘Do not combine drugs and alcohol.

‘Do not use illegal drugs. The impairment caused by illegal drugs can take hours and even days to wear off.

‘Do not use drugs of any variety to get high.

‘Know the side effects of your medications. Read the inserts that come with your medications and speak with your pharmacist

about the drugs' possible impacts on your driving abilities.

? Be aware that drugs interact with each other. Review your list of medications with your pharmacist.

? Ask your pharmacist about the side effects of your medication if alcohol is consumed.

? With prescription and over-the-counter drugs, abuse or misuse can happen and needs to be recognized and corrected. This means that you should not exceed recommended dosages. You should not take someone else's medicine, or use medicine to get high. Further, it means that you should read and respect labels and warnings.

? As a host, monitor your guests' behaviour. Monitoring or preventing drug use can be difficult. You need to be watching your guests for signs of unusual behaviour, such as jitters or unexplained mood-swings. If you suspect someone is impaired, speak up and make alternate, safe arrangements for transportation.

? If you have friends or family members who use illegal drugs, clearly communicate to them that your home is not a place where they can get high. Be sympathetic and supportive by encouraging them to get the help they need to overcome their addiction.

? Do not get in a vehicle if the driver is impaired. Make every safe effort to stop an impaired person from operating a vehicle.

? Report impaired driving to the police.

Whether by drugs, alcohol, fatigue or some other contributing factor, there is no excuse for impaired driving. Be responsible and be safe this holiday season.