

DRIVING AND MARIJUANA: A DANGEROUS MIX

DRIVING WHILE HIGH is a growing problem in the U.S. Estimates show that a third of impaired driving incidents can be traced to marijuana, while many more involve a combination of multiple substances. (1)

In Colorado, marijuana-related traffic deaths increased by 48 percent after the state legalized recreational use of the drug. (1) In Washington State, 18.6% of all DUI cases in the state tested for drugs were positive for THC; from January through April, 2015, 33% were positive for THC. (2) The number of fatally injured drivers positive for marijuana in the state more than doubled following marijuana legalization, reaching 17% in 2014. (3)

Even as Colorado's population has increased, fatal crashes in CO related to alcohol-impaired drivers have fallen during the era of recreational pot legalization, from 160 in 2011 to 143 in 2015 (crashes where Blood Alcohol Content, BAC, was greater than or equal to 0.08 percent), an 11 percent drop over four years. At the same time, traffic fatalities overall have risen, from 447 in 2011 to 608 in 2016, a 26 percent rise over five years, as drivers testing positive for marijuana use have risen sharply.

AAA has released guidelines on impaired driving that are important to remember. First, there is no science showing that drivers reliably become impaired after ingesting a specific amount of marijuana. This is very different from alcohol, and we could never count on a 0.08 BAC level equivalent for marijuana. Second, research has not been able to reliably measure impairment based on THC levels. (4) THC blood levels fall so rapidly that such measured levels are vastly lower than when the impaired driving occurred due to the long delay in testing. But the effect on driving persists beyond the feeling of being high.



One groundbreaking study found that that chronic marijuana use can impair a person's ability to drive for up to three weeks after stopping marijuana use. (5)

Other research has noted non-chronic users who smoke one or two marijuana joints are likely to test positive for marijuana at standard cut-off levels for only 2 - 3 days, with many testing negative 24 hours after smoking marijuana. After three to five days, such users almost always test negative. (6)

Furthermore, marijuana-impaired driving is likely an underreported problem, since many drivers high on

Driving while high on marijuana doubles or triples your risk of a car crash. Driving high on marijuana and alcohol is more harmful than driving on either alone.

marijuana are also using alcohol. (7) Since there is an established standard for drunk driving, the criminal justice system often stops at a lab test showing greater than 0.08 BAC levels.

DRIVING WHILE HIGH is an unappreciated problem, compounded by a growing industry intent on protecting their brand and image. A recent Liberty Mutual survey found that a third of students said driving under the influence of marijuana is legal in states where it is recreational. More than 20% of teens reported it's common among their friends. Parent perceptions were similar: 27% said it's legal and 14% said it's common among friends. (7) A public education campaign on the dangers of driving while high is vital.

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3. Tefft, B. C., Arnold, L. S., & Grabowski, J. G. (2016, May). Prevalence of Marijuana Involvement in Fatal Crashes: Washington, 2010-2014. Washington, DC: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.
4. Battistella, B., Fornari, E., Thomas, A., Mall, J., Chtioui, H., Appenzeller, M. ... Giroud, C. (2013). Weed or wheel! fMRI, behavioural, and toxicological investigations of how cannabis smoking affects skills necessary for driving. PLoS ONE, 8(1), e52545.
5. Bosker, W. M., Karschner, E. L., Lee, D., Goodwin, R. S., Hirvonen, J., ... Ramaekers, J. G. (2013). Psychomotor function in chronic daily cannabis smokers during sustained abstinence. PLoS ONE, 8(1), e53127. Available:
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7. Weed Out the Confusion: One-Third of Teens Think Driving Under The Influence of Marijuana is Legal in States Where Recreational Use By Adults is Permitted <https://libertymutualgroup.com/about-liberty-mutual-site/news-site/Pages/Weed-Out-the-Confusion.aspx>