



Marijuana and Driving: The Problem and What Parents Can Do About It

By Russell Kamer, MD

As I write this article, summer is coming. The days are getting longer and the air more humid. It is the season of graduations, parties, and time out of school. It means that our children will be driving and riding more. Thankfully, they have been well educated about the harms of drinking and driving. More than just being told, teenagers have been inculcated—impressed by frequent teaching and admonition—with the firm belief that it is wrong to drink and drive. On the other hand, they do not have the same fear of smoking marijuana and driving.

The difference in beliefs about drunk driving and stoned driving is astounding. In a **survey of driving age high school students in Manitoba**, over 20% agreed with the statement “There is nothing wrong with using cannabis and driving.” Meanwhile, only 5% thought it was OK to drink and drive. Not surprisingly, two-thirds of those who used marijuana more than once a month didn’t see a problem with driving after using cannabis.

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I don't blame the students. They have grown up during two decades where the dangers of marijuana have been minimized. Even adults, who should know better, ignore the problems of stoned driving. I have had patients drive to my office for their morning appointments smelling of marijuana. They don't seem to think it is a problem. But if someone smelled of alcohol, we would all agree there is a problem, and we wouldn't let them drive home.

Marijuana is an **intoxicating drug that impairs driving**. Anyone who thinks otherwise either never drove after smoking pot or is misinformed. It shouldn't be controversial. In 1994, even the California coordinator for the marijuana advocacy group NORML admitted, "marijuana has been shown to degrade short-term memory, concentration, judgment, and coordination at complex tasks including driving. There have been numerous reports of pot-related accidents--some of them fatal, belying the attractive myth that no one has ever died from marijuana." Originally, I found that quote on the NORML website, but don't look for it now. It's been *scrubbed*, and in its place is an intentionally confusing assessment that states marijuana's "impact in automobile crashes is inconclusive." In their quest for full legalization, NORML has abandoned the honest—but less compelling—strategy of admitting marijuana's harms yet calling for legalization on the grounds of personal freedom.

There is no doubt that marijuana **alters perception, impairs judgement, slows reaction time, interferes with attention, and affects coordination**. The only question is: how long does the impairment last? The answer is: longer than you think. Studies have repeatedly shown that impairment persists long after a person no longer feels high. **Classic experiments on pilots** in flight simulators showed they had off-center landings 24 hours after a single joint—one missed the runway altogether. A more recent study showed a reduction in the **ability to pay attention to two tasks at once**—important when driving—for as long as 8 hours after inhaling a standard amount of marijuana. Interestingly, THC—the intoxicating chemical--could not be detected in blood after 4 hours. In other words, people can be impaired from marijuana even when THC is gone from the blood. This is one problem in detecting marijuana-impaired driving. Especially if there is a delay in testing, THC may not be found in blood even though the driver was under the influence.

What can we do? First, all rules that apply to alcohol should apply to marijuana. Tell your children, "Don't drink and drive, and don't use marijuana and drive." Not, "wait a few hours." Not, "wait until it wears off." If you have used marijuana,

don't drive. And don't get in a car with someone who did. Have a designated driver or call someone.

Next, insist that all school programs about alcohol and driving give equal time to marijuana and driving. Every time the word alcohol is used, the word marijuana should be used also. The message needs to be unambiguous. Current course materials that show alcohol-related driving consequences should be updated with portrayals of stoned drivers and the damage they have done.

In the span of a generation, driving after drinking went from normal to socially unacceptable. We can do the same with driving after smoking marijuana.