

The Dangers of Impaired Driving

by Sue C. Quimby, CPCU, AU, CIC, CPIW, DAE

DON'T DRINK AND DRIVE has been a rallying cry for many years. However, alcohol is not the only problem. Drugs also contribute to the impaired operator issue. Prescription or over the counter medications, legal medicinal/recreational marijuana and illicit drugs can all have a negative effect on driving skills. Educating clients to the dangers of drugs and drinking while boating or driving is another value-added service of the professional insurance agent.

The good news from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) is that the percentage of teens involved in alcohol-related accidents has decreased, but even one fatality is too many. Drivers age 16-20 are 17 times more likely to die in a crash when the blood alcohol level exceeds .08 than when they have not been drinking. Unfortunately, the CDC also estimates that the average drunk driver has driven drunk 80 times before being arrested, and 50-75% of those whose licenses are suspended continue to drive. Twenty-five states have passed laws requiring ignition interlocks for all drunk driving offenders.

According to MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving), drugged driving, or substance impaired driving, is the presence of legal or illegal substances in a person's system that impact driving ability. (www.madd.org) "Poly abuse" is a term used to denote someone mixing alcohol and drugs and then getting behind the wheel. It is a significant enough problem to cause MADD to change their mission statement to include drugged driving in 2015.

Drugs and alcohol, even in small amounts, cause driving skills to deteriorate in numerous ways, including attention, coordination, judgment, perception and reaction time. Alcohol also interferes with balance. Drugs can make it difficult to focus and process information. If nerves and muscles are affected, steering, braking, accelerating, and manipulation of the vehicle are more difficult. Reaction and response times can be slowed.

The cognitive effects of drugs can hinder a person's ability to assess risks and avoid potential hazards by decreasing fear and thus increasing risk-taking behavior. Drugs inhibit a person's ability to stay in their lane and maintain a safe distance from the car in front of them.

Ninety percent of the information processed by the human brain while driving is visual, so impaired vision due to drug use seriously hinders a person's driving ability.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that alcohol use is a factor in up to 50 percent of adolescent and adult deaths associated with water recreation. Nearly one-third of boating fatalities involve alcohol use. (www.hazeldon.org)

Alcohol's effects are heightened by sun exposure and heat. This means that even someone who has not had much to drink is at risk during hot weather activ-



ity. Most people probably do not know that Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) can continue to increase for up to three hours after the last drink is consumed. (www.druginfo.adf.org.au)

It is a common misperception that drinking coffee can help someone sober up. Unfortunately, while the stimulant properties of caffeine may cause a person to think they are more sober, this is not the case. It takes several hours for the effects of alcohol to leave the system. Even the next day, a driver who is hung over may find it difficult to properly operate the vehicle.

Another potentially dangerous fad is beverages that combine alcohol and caffeine. According to The National Council On Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD) so-called "energy drinks" that are popular with young people, can lead to wide awake drunkenness where the impairment from alcohol is not reduced but the drinker is less aware of its effects. (www.ncadd.org)

The National Highway Transportation Safety Association (NHTSA) has a list of programs across the country that offer rides to people who have had too much to drink. (duijusticelink.aaa.com/) Many school districts offer programs to teach students the consequences of driving while impaired, using lifelike reenactments of crashes. Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) offers, among other programs and services, a "Contract for Life" to be signed by teens who promise to refrain from alcohol and drug use, and contact their parents if they are in a potentially dangerous situation, such as riding with a drunk driver. (www.sadd.org) Many high schools and parent organizations offer Project Graduation, an evening of alcohol and drug-free activities, following graduation ceremonies.

Driving or boating while impaired by alcohol and/or drugs is illegal, dangerous and deadly. Helping educate clients to the far-reaching consequences is sign of the true insurance professional.

Previously published in the Insurance Advocate®

