

Press Release

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SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: Marijuana Use and Driving

Researchers and the Partnership to End Addiction say that many drivers using marijuana are impaired and worse, may not recognize that they are impaired. Talking to loved ones about safety when it comes to marijuana and driving is as important as talking to them about drinking and driving.

There are many factors to consider when it comes to marijuana and driving. Here are a few that can contribute to impairment:

- Using higher potency and larger amounts of marijuana
- Having a low tolerance to marijuana or inexperience with marijuana
- Consuming it by smoking or vaping creating a faster “high”
- Combining it with other substances like alcohol or opioids
- Being a relatively new driver with little experience
- Not letting enough time pass after using marijuana

It’s important to note that two similar people can use the same amount and potency of marijuana with different results. One person may be impaired while the other person isn’t based upon their experience as drivers and the way their bodies process the drug. A person driving after using marijuana can find it difficult to react quickly to make split-second decisions. These decisions include when to brake, speed up, or swerve to avoid a crash. They may have problems with divided attention. This means it’s more challenging to handle road conditions, the weather, speed, other nearby drivers, etc., at the same time. They may follow too closely or maintain an improper speed. They are also more likely to weave into another lane which may catch another driver off guard and lead to an accident. The risk of drowsiness is also higher when using marijuana and driving.

A study reported in The Journal of the American Medical Association showed that almost 200 drivers who were regular marijuana consumers were divided into 3 groups. One group wasn't given any marijuana while the other two were given different strengths of marijuana to smoke. All 3 groups studied while driving in a simulator that measured their driving ability. At specific times, the drivers were asked "How high are you?"; "How impaired are you to drive?"; and, "Would you drive in your current state?" The drivers who smoked marijuana reported being reluctant to drive right after smoking. Almost 70% of them thought they were ok to drive after 1.5 hours, even though there was no improvement in their driving ability as measured by the tests. On average, it took 4.5 hours for them to be able to drive safely.

How do states determine impairment? State laws vary in terms of defining impairment:

- Zero tolerance laws mean no amount of THC, the ingredient in marijuana that produces a "high", can be in a person's system.
- Per se laws prohibit driving if a person's THC levels exceeds a certain limit (e.g., 2-5 nanograms of THC/millimeter of blood).
- Permissible inference laws allow a person the ability to prove why they were not impaired in court even if they exceeded the legal limit.
- Under the influence of drugs (DUID) requires a person to be under the influence of or affected by THC.

At present, it is easier and less costly to identify impairment for alcohol with a Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) test, but there is no equivalent test for marijuana. In many states, a police officer who pulls over a person for erratic driving will use a breathalyzer first. Often additional testing is not conducted if the BAC test is positive. This means that if the person was using alcohol and marijuana, which is not unusual, marijuana use will be under-reported.

If the BAC test is negative, the officer may call in a specially-trained drug recognition expert (DRE). The DRE will conduct a field sobriety test and ask for a drug screen (e.g., saliva, urine or blood) which can be used to support a charge of impairment. By the time a person has the screen, their body may have further processed the drug. If this is the case, the results won't reflect the level of intoxication experienced when the person was first pulled over.

States like Alabama and Michigan are using roadside oral fluid tests coupled with field sobriety tests to determine if a person is impaired. The oral fluid tests provide results from an oral swab in minutes. They can detect use of marijuana, opioids, methamphetamine, cocaine, benzodiazepines, and other substances. Coupled with information from the officer who pulled the driver over and other tests (e.g., balance, pupil size, pulse rate, muscle tone, etc.), a positive oral fluid test can be used to support an arrest.

With marijuana use climbing, there's a strong need for a reliable breath test to check if someone has recently used cannabis, especially for drivers. A single breath test might not be accurate enough because marijuana can stay in the body for weeks. That makes it hard to tell if someone used it recently or a long time ago. Researchers are exploring the use of two breath tests about an hour apart. If this works, it could lead to a new way for police to check for recent cannabis use on the spot.

Developing a reliable breath test for cannabis is important not only for public safety but also for ensuring fairness in law enforcement. Completing the research is expected to take several years.

How to protect youth and young adults? Researchers suggest including marijuana along with alcohol in any discussions with teens about safe driving. Asking questions like "What would you do if the person offering you a ride has used marijuana?" or "What do you think the risks are of driving after consuming edibles or smoking?" can get the conversation started.

State your expectations around marijuana and driving use with the teen or young adult licensed drivers in your home. It may help to ask them why anyone would consider driving impaired when they could risk an accident, injury or fatality, increased insurance costs, legal fees, jail time, etc. Let them know ahead of time what the consequences will be for driving under the influence. Be sure to follow through with any consequences you state.

Consider asking a loved one of legal age using marijuana how long they think they should wait before driving. It may be better to use designated drivers, public transportation or ride-sharing services if they are unwilling or unable to wait the recommended amount of time.

Partnership to End Addiction is a national nonprofit uniquely positioned to reach, engage and help families impacted by addiction. With decades of experience in research, direct service, communications, and partnership-building, they provide families with personalized support and resources while mobilizing policymakers, researchers, and health care professionals to better address addiction systemically on a national scale. For more information, please visit <https://drugfree.org>.

SAFE is the only alcohol and substance use prevention agency in Glen Cove whose mission is to eliminate alcohol and substance use in Glen Cove. Its Coalition is concerned about marijuana use—especially in youth as their brains are developing. The Coalition is conducting a prevention awareness campaign entitled "Keeping Glen Cove SAFE; Underage Marijuana Use," to educate and update the community regarding marijuana use and its negative consequences. To learn more please about the Coalition please follow us on www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition or visit SAFE's website to learn more about Marijuana use at www.safeglencove.org.