

Project Backgrounder

ABC's of Drugs and Driving

People use drugs. For thousands of years, people have been using caffeine, alcohol, cannabis and many other ***psychoactive drugs***. While often used as medicines, most drugs have also been used to help people relax, have fun, or connect with the spirit world.

Drugs get in the way of safe driving. Drugs change the way we think, move and behave. So driving after using them is dangerous. It's also costly to individuals, families and others.

- Car crashes are the leading cause of death among 15-24 year olds, and alcohol plays a part 45% of the time
- Over 68% of those hurt in BC in 2007 (and 82% of those who died) in alcohol-related crashes were sitting in the drinking driver's car
- Alcohol contributed to 2,131 crashes in BC in 2007 while other drugs contributed to 339 crashes

It's not just about injury and death. Drug-impaired driving is costly to individuals and families. But there are also medical, social and legal costs.

- In 2006, there were about 216,480 crashes in Canada involving drivers impaired by alcohol or other drugs
- \$2.2 billion or more was paid out for vehicle repair, medical costs and insurance claims

Driving after using drugs is still too common. Most Canadians do not drive when impaired (when they have had too much alcohol or too much of another drug to drive without risk). The number of ***impaired drivers*** is lower now than it was 30 years ago. But lately there has been no decline in drug-driving rates. Some impaired drivers are long-time heavy users of alcohol or other drugs. But most of them are social users (people who use alcohol or other drugs once in a while to relax or have fun with friends). They sometimes overdo it and make bad choices, including driving or riding with someone who is impaired.

Alcohol is our #1 problem. In our society, alcohol is commonly used to celebrate the new year or a new job. We use it to relax after a long day. We use it to soothe sadness and pain. Alcohol is so popular that we forget even small amounts can affect us. It can slow down the way we think, move and respond to "surprises" on the road. It takes at least an hour for each drink of alcohol to lose its effects (2 drinks takes 2 hours, 3 drinks takes 3 hours, and so on). It can take longer if alcohol is used with other drugs such as cannabis or prescription medications. Mixing substances can increase the effects of alcohol. Even energy drinks, ecstasy and other stimulant drugs cannot stop the slow-down effects of alcohol.

Fast Facts

Life is complicated.

*Many things influence what we think and do, and what happens as a result. Even our choice to drive after using alcohol or other drugs — or our choice to not drive — is affected by a mix of things going on in and around us. A few of the **factors that shape what we think and do** include our personality, our friends, our family history, and the number of options we have to get home safely.*

Cannabis and other drugs can also cause impairment. Cannabis is involved in about half of the impaired-driving incidents that involve youth. While people who use cannabis and drive tend to be overly careful, they're still taking risks. Too much cannabis affects movement and other driving skills. The same is true of most other drugs. (Caffeine, our society's favourite drug, is one of the exceptions. It won't negatively affect driving unless used in extreme amounts.) It's safest to wait at least 3-4 hours before driving after using cannabis or, better yet, find another way home. Driving after using both cannabis and alcohol, even in small amounts, is even riskier. Together they create more than double the effects of either drug on its own.

Q & A

Q: What can we do to lower our drug-impaired driving rate?

A: We can 'influence the influences' (change the things that make drug-impaired driving seem easy, acceptable or necessary).

We can help individuals

- think ahead about possible consequences to their actions and make good choices
- take responsibility for their actions and better manage their future actions
- learn how to respond to and bounce back from problems and pressures
- build a bigger and stronger support network
- lead by example to shape how others think and act

We can influence groups by helping them recognize their ability to

- connect, talk things out, and together form a shared vision of health and well-being
- promote safer **standards/norms** against drug-impaired driving
- address the situations or conditions that lead to drug-impaired driving
- promote **interdependence** among people and strive for a more caring social environment

Tips for Making Social Marketing Products to Reduce Drug-Impaired Driving

- Use clear, simple **messaging**, but do not gloss over the complex issues involved in drug-impaired driving.
- Know your **audience**. All people and all situations are not the same. Reaching different audiences—other students, parents, and so on—may require different messaging. Reaching different personalities—people who are shy, risk-taker types, social 'animals'—may require messages targeted to them.
- Encourage a shift in thinking. Find ways to attract others while steering them away from the idea that driving after using drugs spells freedom, privacy and a way to impress peers. Show them that NOT driving while impaired gives you freedom from problems with parents, police and others.
- Focus on health and relationships (instead of seeing drug use as a disease or crime).

- Highlight how driving is a privilege. And focus on driving as a public, not private, activity. Demonstrate how the rules about drugs and driving benefit communities and individuals.
- Focus on friendship. Talk about what being a good friend is all about, including being available to help in times of trouble. Challenge unhealthy pressures to conform. Use words that reflect mutual respect—“friends both get help and give help.” And keep gender differences in mind.
- Avoid scare tactics. Young people are rarely affected by scare tactics. If anything, scare tactics cause youth to question the truth of a message. Almost everyone knows someone who has driven home drunk without trouble. So saying that ‘drinking and driving will kill you’ may make some youth simply shrug their shoulders. It’s better to speak in a way that people identify with—humour. Just be sure it doesn’t minimize the message or offend people.
- Unite and motivate. Many people respond better to messages that make them feel included in something. So it makes sense to avoid messages that divide, alienate or make people feel bad about themselves. This means that even people who have driven impaired in the past should feel a sense of belonging in any campaign aimed at lowering current drug-driving rates.
- Resist the urge to exaggerate the numbers of people who drive impaired. It can make the behaviour more attractive to risk-taker types.
- Say no to “just say no.” This kind of messaging is based on the idea that young people’s lives are simple. It also assumes they are hungry for advice from ‘the authorities.’ Try instead to both engage people and connect them with others. And give them opportunities to explore, discuss and assess drugs-and-driving-related issues.
- Use tools that speak to your audience. Young people, for example, enjoy using social media tools.

Sites for Research

Drugs and Driving: www.drugsanddriving.ca

This site features useful information and fun exercises to help students understand the elements of safe driving and riding. It offers resources that enhance individual capacity to make safe decisions and reach out for support from family, friends and others when necessary. It also offers schools/students a place to upload their impaired-driving campaign materials for assessment and selection for posting on the site.

Centre for Addictions Research of BC: www.carbc.ca

Arrive Alive: www.arrivealive.org

BCAA Road Safety Foundation: www.tsfbcaa.com/27.aspx

CCSA Drugs and Driving: www.ccsa.ca/Eng/Priorities/ImpairedDriving/Pages/default.aspx

ICBC: www.icbc.com/road-safety/safer-drivers/impaired-driving

Caution!

The Internet is an ever-evolving collection of material from a wide variety of sources. Some are reliable and credible (they’re based on careful research aimed at understanding an issue). Others are not so reliable and credible (they’re based on the personal experiences or beliefs of people or groups who may or may not have a specific agenda or reason for pushing a point of view, regardless of facts or evidence).

Glossary

Psychoactive drugs affect the brain and other parts of our central nervous system. Stimulant drugs (caffeine, cocaine) speed up our central nervous system. Depressant drugs (alcohol, sleeping pills) slow down our central nervous system. Hallucinogens (magic mushrooms, LSD) change the way things look, sound and feel. Note: Some drugs, including cannabis, fit in more than one category.

Impaired drivers are people who operate a vehicle under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Alcohol's effects on performance start at low blood alcohol content (BAC) levels. Because of this, in BC, young drivers are legally required to maintain a zero BAC. Drivers in general will be subject to penalties at 0.05% BAC and possibly criminal charges as well when above 0.08% BAC. Across Canada, 38.7% of drivers who died in 2008 had used alcohol (85% of these were over the 0.08% level). Though most Canadians avoid driving after using any drug, cannabis and driving is becoming more frequent, especially among youth.

Standards/norms refer to rules or behaviours that most people agree are beneficial or acceptable. For example, it is standard practice not to smoke near a playground full of children. Most people agree, including smokers, that it is best not to smoke around children.

Factors that help shape what we think and do include:

- Individual features—personality, experiences, motivations
- Social connections—friends, family, clubs, groups, religion
- Environmental aspects—access to a vehicle, access to alcohol or other drugs, number of different choices to get home safely, community norms and regulations, police presence

Interdependence means we are all connected. As humans, we need each other in order to survive and thrive in a world where drug use is common.

Social marketing means using different strategies, tools and techniques to “sell” an idea, concept or value to members of society. (Think of all the messaging in schools and the media about the importance of exercising and eating healthily.)

Messaging refers to what you want people to understand or consider about an issue.

Audiences are groups of people who share a language, point of view or experience (parents, teens, teachers, people who take risks, people who are shy).

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