

Opening Up the Debate: Marijuana Use and Driving

07/14/11 by Elizabeth Smith

For many years, most of us thought that **drunk drivers** presented the greatest threat to our safety on America's roads and freeways. Then texting drivers grabbed our attention as they kept sending out written messages to others, refusing to admit the dangerous nature of their behavior.

Now, we've got a rapidly growing, new crop of problem drivers out navigating the nation's roads. Many of these people view their medical marijuana as a healing agent and not as a drug frequently used by others to simply get "high" or comfortably disoriented.

Hopefully, some of the following information will help convince many marijuana users to start handling their drugs in a safer manner. No one should have to suffer a serious traffic **injury or die** just because others were too lazy to wait for an extended period of time after using marijuana to drive their cars.

2004 NHTSA Study Addressed How Marijuana Use Can Affect Driving Skills

In an April **2004 report** (DOT HS 809 725) entitled, "*Drugs and Human Performance Fact Sheets*," the National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) commented on how marijuana (and drugs made using its active agents) can affect a driver's skills and abilities. *(The following statements are set forth on page twelve of that publication.)*

- Marijuana is the second most frequently detected psychoactive substance among driving populations;

- Cannabis or marijuana has been shown to impair performance on driver simulator tasks and on open and closed driving courses **for up to approximately three hours** after it's been used." *[Emphasis added]*;
- The driving performances of those who have used marijuana reveal "**increased reaction times, impaired time and distance estimation**, inability to maintain headway . . . **subjective sleepiness [and] motor incoordination**," among other problems *[Emphasis added]*;
- Marijuana may particularly impair monotonous and prolonged driving; and
- People who have recently smoked marijuana may require an increased amount of time to evaluate situations and determine appropriate responses.

Current Statistics Regarding Marijuana Use and Driving Accidents

In a recent article published by *The Los Angeles Times*, writer Ralph Vartabedian looked at how marijuana smokers are impacting road safety. He says that California currently blames about 1,000 annual deaths and injuries "directly on drugged drivers." (See: "**Stoned Driving is Uncharted Territory**."

Vartabedian also states, "Fatalities in crashes where drugs were the primary cause *and alcohol was not involved* jumped **55 percent** over the 10 years ending in 2009." California's law enforcement officials attribute much of the state's current drug usage to the medical marijuana laws passed during the last decade.

Those officials may be right. Since early 2004, California has issued more than **55,000** medical marijuana identification cards. (See: *The California Department of Public Health's Web site page entitled, "Medical Marijuana Program."*)

Future Efforts to Protect American Drivers

Unfortunately, there isn't a current national standard for determining how much marijuana a driver can safely smoke before becoming a hazard to others. Although **various states** are trying to protect their citizens under different safety standards, none of them have found one single, reliable method for evaluating safe marijuana usage for their drivers.

Until much more scientific research and testing can be completed, medical marijuana users must carefully monitor their own driving habits. Everyone else must keep relying on all of our law enforcement officials to crack down a bit harder on those drivers they stop and find are clearly impaired due to their recreational use of marijuana and other drugs.

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