Drug driving

- Drug driving is a contributing factor in up to 41% of road fatalities in Australia[1-3].
- Drug use increases the risk of crash involvement, with the risk estimated to be equal to that of a driver with a blood alcohol concentration of up to 0.15%[4].

Image source: Queensland Police Service

State of the Road A Fact Sheet of the Centre for Accident Research & Road Safety - Queensland (CARRS-Q)

THE FACTS

This fact sheet complements *CARRS-Q's Medication and Driving Fact Sheet.*

- Research demonstrates that an alarming number of motorists are driving after consuming illegal drugs and the occurrence of drug driving in some groups may be greater than drink driving[5].
- Rates of self-reported drug driving have decreased in recent years in Australia, from 21% in 2007 to 15.1% in 2016[6].
- In Queensland in 2015/16, almost 50,000 roadside drug tests resulted in over 10,000 positive tests, representing a positive test rate of 21.9%[7].
- In the past two years , the rate of roadside drug testing in Queensland has more than doubled[8].

How do drugs affect the body?

- Many drugs can affect an individual's ability to drive safely, including illegal (illicit) drugs, as well as legal drugs such as alcohol and medications (prescribed and over-the-counter).
- Drugs that affect driving include cannabis (marijuana), amphetamines, benzodiazepines, hallucinogens, antihistamines and opiates.
- In 2016, the most commonly used illegal drugs were cannabis (10.4%), followed by the misuse of pain-killers/opiods (3.6%), cocaine (2.5%), ecstacy (2.2%) and meth/amphetamines (1.4%)[6].
- Many drugs are highly addictive to the extent that users need them in order to function in their daily routine.
- Excessive drug use can cause cognitive impairment, which can affect judgement, memory and reaction time.
- If an individual consumes drugs in the evening they can still have drugs present in their system the next day.
- The level of drugs which will remain in a person's system over time depends on a range of factors including the quality and quantity of the drug, if it was taken in combination with other drugs/alcohol, and the individual's metabolism.

Drug use worsens your driving through cognitive impairment, which affects your judgement, memory and reaction time.

- Drug use affects the driving task by[9]:
  - Slowing down reaction times and reducing coordination – reducing the ability to perform in an emergency.
  - Reducing the ability to multi-task – an essential skill for safe driving.
  - Causing a distorted view of time and distance – reducing the ability to drive safely and identify driving hazards.
  - Reducing your attention span, increasing the risk of not noticing other road users.
  - Increasing over-confidence in driving skills that are not supported by actual driving ability.
  - Causing hyperactivity, unstable moods, and aggressive or dangerous driving.
  - Causing convulsions, dizziness, fainting, muscle weakness or unconsciousness.
  - The sudden onset of fatigue as the stimulant effects wear off.
  - Causing hallucinations and paranoia.
  - Resulting in an altered view and experience of reality, whereby actions and responses are quite different to what is actually required.

Can I have a small quantity of drugs and still drive?

- The best and safest approach is to never drive after taking any amount of illegal drugs, or prescribed or over-the-counter medications that could affect your driving
- Speak to your doctor or pharmacist about the potential affect a medication may have on your driving and be aware of the dangers of mixing medications and consuming alcohol
- Severe penalties apply to anyone caught driving under the influence of illegal drugs. However, if you are going to use drugs, the safest approach is to plan ahead and adopt an alternative transportation plan, such as:
  - Organising a driver who will not be using any drugs or drinking alcohol.
  - Using public transport, catching a cab or using a rideshare service.
  - Walking – but make sure to walk in a group or with a sober friend, and remember to stay on the footpath and only cross at marked crossings or where you are clearly visible to motorists.

Penalties for drug drivers

- Drug driving legislation is in effect in all Australian jursidictions. Consequences of drug driving include not only a fine and loss of licence, but also the potential loss of insurance.
- In recent years, roadside drug testing has increased, using saliva samples to detect a range of illicit drugs, including:

- THC (the active component in cannabis).
- Methamphetamine (found in drugs such as speed, ice and crystal meth).
- MDMA (commonly known as ecstacy).

- In Queensland, there is zero tolerance for driving under the influence of illegal drugs, meaning you can penalised if any trace of drugs is found in your system.
- A drug driving offence in Queensland may carry a maximum penalty of up to AUD$3,413, licence disqualification for up to nine months or a term of imprisonment for up to nine months[9].
- Prosecutions can be commenced as a result of breaches of the Workplace Health and Safety Act[10] for any worker under the influence of drugs who has been found negligent in his/her duties. Management, supervisors or fellow workers could also be legally liable if they were aware of a worker's drug driving and failed to respond to the situation (send the driver home and/or suspend his/her driving tasks).

CARRS-Q'S WORK IN THE AREA

- Review of drug driving in Queensland, by exploring QPS roadside drug testing data and crash data and performing a data scoping exercise with other jurisdictions.
- Longitudinal evaluation of the Queensland roadside drug testing program, drug prevalence rates and characteristics of detected drivers[11].
- Profile of drug-involved fatal crashes and characteristics of the persons involved.
- Evaluation of the Queensland and ACT roadside drug testing programs, including self-reported intentions to reoffend and the influence of punishment avoidance[12-13].
- Profile of drug drivers in Queensland, including perceptions of the roadside drug testing program[14].
- Examination of driver awareness of roadside drug testing in Queensland and the impact on future beahviour[15].
- Community survey of driving while taking medications with a warning label, and the barriers to following such warnings[16].
- Profile of prescribed drugs involved in fatal crashes in rural and remote Queensland and characteristics of the persons involved.
- Presentation to the Queensland government "Safer Roads, Safer Queensland" forum about the social impact of drugs and alcohol on road safety.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The National Road Safety Strategy[17] identifies a number of goals in this area. These include:

- Investigating the use of emerging roadside drug testing technology to apply to other illicit and licit drugs.
- Collaborating with police to strengthen the deterrence effects of random roadside drug testing programs, and to improve public awareness of these programs.
- Reviewing international best practice and identifying the cost-effectiveness of interventions for dealing with high risk and repeat traffic offenders.

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