

MEDIA RELEASE

Embargoed 9.30am, 31 October, 2007

Drug users more likely to drive than drinkers

Illegal and pharmaceutical drug users are far more likely to drive after taking drugs than those who drink alcohol, new research shows.

The Australian Drug Foundation (ADF), in conjunction with Turning Point Alcohol & Drug Centre (TP), today announced the findings of their comprehensive year-long study into the drug-driving habits of Australian motorists. The major component of the project was a confidential and anonymous online survey of 6801 Australian drivers about their attitudes toward, and experiences of, drugs and driving. Among the major findings:

- 51.3 per cent of respondents who used cannabis reported driving within three hours of drug use;
- 52.7 per cent of respondents who used methamphetamine reported driving within three hours of drug use;
- 37.5 per cent of respondents who used ecstasy reported driving within three hours of drug use; and
- 30.3 per cent of respondents who used benzodiazepines (also known as minor tranquilisers) reported driving within three hours of drug use.

This compares to 13.8 per cent of alcohol users who admitted driving with a Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) greater than .05.

Who are our drug drivers?

ADF principal researcher Jane Mallick said an analysis of the survey respondents' age and gender showed men were more likely to use drugs and then drive, than women.

"Of alcohol users, for example, men were almost twice as likely as women to get behind the wheel after drinking, with almost one in five (18.6 per cent) having driven with a BAC of more than .05 in the previous year, compared to 10.8 per cent of women," Dr Mallick said.

When it came to cannabis, more than half the male respondents who used the drug (61.8 per cent), admitted driving within three hours, compared to 41.5 per cent of women. Male users of pharmaceutical drugs such as benzodiazepines were also more likely to drive following use, than female users – with 37.5 per cent admitting doing so, compared to 25.3 per cent of women. "However, when it came to methamphetamine users and driving, women were as likely as men to drive within three hours of taking the drug (50.8 per cent compared to 54.8 per cent)," she said.

The research showed young people were more likely to drive under the influence of alcohol and ecstasy. However, driving after using cannabis and benzodiazepines was equally prevalent across all ages.

Also revealed was that the more frequently a person uses a drug, the more likely they are to drug drive. More than nine in 10 (91 per cent) daily cannabis users reported driving under its influence, far outweighing the one-third (32.4 per cent) who used cannabis once a month (or less) and drove. Similarly for alcohol and benzodiazepines, daily users were more likely to report driving under the influence than monthly users (29.6 per cent vs 4.4 per cent and 75 per cent vs 22.6 per cent).

Ignorance is not bliss

The research showed most drivers were well informed about the dangers of drink-driving and the advisory time frame for driving following alcohol consumption, because of widespread educational campaigns warning against drink-driving.

- 2 -

However, Dr Mallick said the survey revealed many illicit and pharmaceutical drug users did not know about the impact these substances could have on their driving ability.

“More than two-thirds of respondents knew ‘a little’ or ‘nothing’ about the impact of illicit drugs on driving, with the exception of cannabis, where 51.1 per cent of respondents reported knowing ‘a little’ and 33.2 per cent knowing ‘a lot’,” Dr Mallick said. “And users of pharmaceutical drugs were not much more knowledgeable, with 42.2 per cent of benzodiazepine users saying they knew ‘nothing’ about the effect the drug could have on their driving ability.”

“Overwhelmingly, respondents had little idea about how long to wait between the use of drugs other than alcohol and driving.”

A risky business

According to the survey, illicit drug users were far less likely to think drug driving was dangerous compared to those who had never used illicit drugs. While 78.6 per cent of non-users considered driving after using cannabis to be dangerous, only 30 per cent of cannabis users felt this way. And while 88.6 per cent of non-users saw drug driving under methamphetamine as risky, only 31 per cent of users agreed.

The research suggests illicit drug users do not consider their behaviour to be risky to driving - as far as most are concerned, taking drugs before they get behind the wheel makes little difference to their driving.

In particular, the research showed that methamphetamine users saw negligible impact on their driving ability the last time they drove within three hours of taking the drug. Of those 472 users who reported drug driving, more than half (56 per cent) reported “no change” in their driving ability. In fact, 27.5 per cent said their driving had actually *improved*.

And many licit drug users felt the same way, with 67.4 per cent of benzodiazepine users who had driven within 3 hours of its use, reported “no change” in their driving ability after taking the drug.

Looking to the future

Dr Mallick said the research revealed that when it comes to drugs other than alcohol and driving, there is a clear need to provide widespread, targeted education and information to drug-using groups.

“Information and education initiatives need to focus on the impairment to driving ability for all forms of drug use, including illicit and pharmaceutical drugs and we must not forget alcohol,” she said. “It is important that we don’t get side-tracked into focusing on illicit drug use alone. The prime concern here is road safety and a further reduction in road trauma, with a strong focus on preventing and discouraging drug-impaired driving.”

This research is the most extensive of its kind ever conducted in Australia, and, in addition to the survey, comprised a comprehensive review of Australian and international drug literature on drugs and driving and a series of in-depth, anonymous interviews with key experts on road safety and drug prevention.

ENDS

To arrange an interview contact:

Brian O’Neil, Public Relations Exchange, ph 03 9607 4500 or 0411 055 284

The Drugs and Driving in Australia research project was funded by leading national insurer AAMI, which has a long history of commissioning independent research about a range of road safety issues, including speeding, drink driving, fatigue, road rage, and young drivers. This is an important part of AAMI’s approach to promoting road safety and is designed to inform and educate drivers about unsafe driving attitudes and behaviours.