



5 Minute Safety Talk

Impairment

Impairment: It's not just alcohol

When we think about impaired driving, we tend to think first about alcohol. Drinking and driving has plagued our roadways for decades, and alcohol continues to be involved in one-third of all fatal crashes each year. It is a serious issue, and every employer must address it with comprehensive policies and procedures.

But impairment can take many forms. Distraction, drowsiness, use of marijuana or taking opioid pain relievers can impact our ability to drive safely.

DISTRACTION

Distracted driving is responsible for at least 3,000 fatal crashes each year, though the Council believes the number is much higher, because too many state crash reports lack fields for including "distraction" and "cell phone use" as contributing crash factors.

Consider the research:

- Drivers talking on cell phones can miss "seeing" up to 50% of their driving environment, meaning they can miss stop signs, pedestrians, school buses – even other vehicles¹
- Distraction lasts much longer than we think. Drivers who message at a stop light can be mentally distracted for up to 23 seconds after sending the message and starting to drive again².
- In-vehicle and voice-activated systems also present risks. Drivers using in-vehicle, voice-activated touch screen features to program GPS or send messages are visually and mentally distracted for more than 40 seconds.³

FATIGUE

Nearly 70% of employees in safety-critical industries, such as transportation, are tired at work, according

to NSC research. Fatigue increases workers' chances of on-the-job incidents, and employers are feeling the effects. **An NSC survey found nine in 10 employers have directly felt the impacts of employee fatigue.**

Consider the facts:

- 21% of all fatal crashes may involve a drowsy driver – as many as 6,400 deaths each year⁴
- Driving on four to five hours of sleep means you are four times as likely to crash – the same crash risk as being legally drunk (.08 BAC)⁵
- After 90 minutes of continuous driving, your performance starts to decline⁶

OPIOID PAINKILLERS AND OTHER MEDICATIONS

Even when taken as prescribed under the supervision of a doctor, opioid painkillers can cause impairment. These medicines can cause drowsiness, alter visual functions and impact judgement and motor skills.

Some over-the-counter cold and flu medications can have similar effects and limit one's ability to drive safely. Consider the research around prescription opioids:

- An NSC survey found seven in 10 employers have been directly impacted by prescription drug misuse in the workplace⁷
- 64% of American drivers mistakenly believe it is safe to drive while taking opioid pain medicines, according to an NSC public opinion poll⁸
- 16% of drivers involved in fatal crashes in 2016 who tested positive for drugs had opioids in their system⁹



MARIJUANA

Marijuana intoxication impacts our reaction time, perception, short-term memory, attention and motor skills – all of which are necessary to drive safely.¹⁰

While there is no breathalyzer to detect marijuana impairment, and we need better data collection around marijuana-involved crashes, there are a few facts to consider:

- Motor vehicle crashes account for nearly two-thirds of U.S. trauma center admissions, and 66% of people admitted tested positive for drugs or alcohol¹¹
- 6% of drivers are concerned that marijuana legalization will negatively impact traffic safety¹²
- 3% of drivers admit to driving after using marijuana either recreationally or medicinally in the last month¹³

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS

Impairment and driving never mix.

To limit your chances of being distracted while driving:

- Check email, texts and calls before getting behind the wheel
- Tell coworkers you will be driving so they are not tempted to call or text while you're on the road
- Encourage your employer to establish a safe driving policy that prohibits employees from using handheld or hands-free cell phones behind the wheel

To limit the effects of fatigue:

- Get seven to nine hours of sleep each night
- Know the signs of a sleep disorder and get tested if you believe you suffer from chronic issues such as sleep apnea
- Let supervisors know if you are too tired to perform a safety-sensitive task or if you need to be rotated due to time-on-task fatigue

To limit the effects of marijuana and medicines, particularly opioids:

- Do not drive under the influence of any substance that could cause impairment, even if that substance has been legally prescribed
- Remember: If you feel different, you drive different. Make alternative arrangements if you feel a substance has compromised your judgment, reflexes and fine motor skills.

- If you work in a safety-critical job, such as transportation, talk to your doctor about possible alternatives to opioids to treat your pain
- If you must take opioids, make arrangements with your supervisor to work as safely as possible

TAKE IT HOME

We deserve to be safe both on and off the job. Talk to your loved ones about the various forms of impaired driving. Have them pledge to drive cell-free. Talk to them about prioritizing their sleep health and getting enough sleep each night. Understand the risks involved with taking opioid pain relievers so loved ones feel empowered to discuss these risks – and alternatives – with their prescribers. And, marijuana may be legal for recreational or medicinal use, but it is still an impairing substance that can compromise your ability to drive safely.

When you set good driving habits for yourself, you can help your loved ones make the same choices for their own safety, too.

Sources:

- ¹ According to NSC White Paper, Understanding the Distracted Brain: <https://www.nsc.org/road-safety/safety-topics/distracted-driving/distracted-brain>
- ² According to AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety
- ³ According to AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety
- ⁴ According to AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety
- ⁵ According to AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety
- ⁶ Ting, P. H., Hwang, J. R., Doong, J. L., & Jeng, M. C. (2008). Driver fatigue and highway driving: A simulator study. *Physiology and Behavior*, 94(3), 448–453.
- ⁷ According to a 2017 NSC survey
- ⁸ According to a 2017 NSC survey
- ⁹ According to research from the Governors Highway Safety Association: <https://www.getsmartaboutdrugs.gov/family/drugged-driving-what-you-should-know>
- ¹⁰ According to NSC Research Document, Marijuana and Driving: https://www.nsc.org/Portals/0/Documents/NSCDocuments_Advocacy/Divisions/ADID/Position-on-Cannabis-and-Driving.pdf
- ¹¹ Walsh JM, Flegel R, Atkins R, Cangianelli LA, Cooper C, Welsh C, et al. Drug and Alcohol Use Among Drivers Admitted to a Level-1 Trauma Center. *Accid Anal Prev*. 2005;37:894–901.
- ¹² According to an NSC 2017 survey
- ¹³ According to an NSC 2017 survey

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