



888-516-6522

Traffic safety bulletin

## Long Summer Weekends

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Think long weekend. Now think like a cop who pulled traffic duty on a long weekend. Think keeping impaired drivers off the road. When we think impairment, most people think of alcohol. In fact, most of us have driven impaired and didn't even know it. Impairment can take many forms, like fatigue, distraction, the cell phone, apart from the usual suspects, alcohol and drugs.

The question for this week is **"When is it safe to drive impaired?"** The answer is "Never". The level for conviction under the Criminal Code is 80 milligrams of alcohol per 100 milliliters of blood, but impairment occurs at lower concentrations than this.

Many years ago, we did a test on the closed course at the Skid Control School under the supervision of the Halton Police and with input from the Addiction Research Foundation. Drivers were trained to perform a series of exercises stone-cold sober and their times for performing the circuit were recorded. After lunch, which included some specially prepared cocktails, they performed the same exercises. Some, who were the control group, had no alcohol in their drinks and the rest had measured amounts of alcohol for their body weight so that they would approach the 50 milligram level. At a roadside breathalyzer check, police can hand out a 12 hour suspension if a driver blows over the 50 mg/100 ml blood alcohol level.

As expected, the impaired group did more poorly than the control group in the next round of driving exercises. The times for completing the circuit of exercises was about the same as when they were sober, but they hit a lot more pylons. The feedback was that people drove "normally" because they didn't feel impaired. But clearly they were, by the trail of pylons left behind. It takes far less alcohol than most people think to impair their abilities. The only clear answer is to NEVER drink and drive.

It has taken thirty years for drivers to realize that impaired driving is one of the most significant contributors to traffic fatalities. You can count on police services to be extra vigilant on the last big long weekend celebration of the summer.

Impaired driving still is a factor in approximately 28% of traffic fatalities. The category has been broadened to include other forms of impairment that were not understood or treated less seriously in the past. This includes the broad spectrum of illicit drugs. But a complete tea-totaler can have impaired reactions when using over-the-counter and prescription medications. Read the labels carefully and consult your doctor or pharmacist if you have

any questions, especially if you or a relative is taking multiple medications. Actually, everyone has driven impaired at some time or another, if you expand the definition of impairment to include distraction and fatigue. Just like the subjects in the alcohol study, drivers do not know how much competence they are giving up to these twin impairments.

Fatigue plays into the long-weekend lifestyle. With partying, traveling, water sports, and generally having a good time, we lose track of our need for sleep. When things finally calm down, like on the drive home, fatigue catches up with us. Although there are a thousand pieces of advice on how to stave off sleep, not many of them work. Caffeine actually does work, but only for a short time. Listening to bad music, (definition up to the reader), windows wide open, etc are only distractions from what your body really needs. It needs sleep and it *will* sleep despite the strength of your willpower.

The really insidious part of fatigue is that while you may not be drifting off the roadway, we don't have a reliable way to measure how much your attentiveness is lost. Scarier is that some drivers have precious little to lose in the first place. Perception and reaction time slowed just a little could mean the difference between a near miss or a disaster if you need to respond brilliantly in the face of another driver's mistake.

Something that does work is a power nap. It is tough to pull yourself away from the cottage fun, but grabbing an afternoon nap, an hour before hitting the road can be just the answer to extending your attentiveness on the trip home.

Distraction is an impairment that we have all dealt with to some degree, whether it is with a car full of rowdy friends, a crying child or the cell phone. Again, it is extremely difficult to quantify the impairment that these distractions present, partly because we all have different thresholds for tolerance. In experiments, attempts have been made to compare the kind and number of errors made by drinking drivers with those on cell phones.

Many of the corporations that Skid Control School trains already have instituted policies that restrict cell phone use in the car. We might as well get used to the idea that one day legislation will be enacted that does the same thing. Long weekends are intended for carefree fun, but when comes to driving it takes careful attention to get home safely.

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