

## **A Cup of Health with CDC**

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Alcohol and Drug Use Among Traffic Fatalities in West Virginia 2004-2005

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

[Matthew Reynolds] Welcome to A Cup of Health with CDC, a weekly broadcast of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Matthew Reynolds

Every half hour someone is killed in a car crash involving a drinking driver. Last year over thirty percent of drivers killed in traffic crashes had blood alcohol levels over the legal limit.

Drugs can impair our ability to drive. We've all heard of alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine contributing to crashes. Even common prescription drugs can affect our ability to drive.

Researchers at CDC use law enforcement records to study how often people killed in car crashes were using drugs or alcohol.

Here to discuss the effects of alcohol and drugs on driving is Dr. Len Paulozzi, of CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Dr. Paulozzi is one of the authors of a recent report on fatal crashes in West Virginia.

It's great to have you on the program, Dr. Paulozzi.

[Dr. Paulozzi] Thank you, Matthew.

[Matthew Reynolds] Dr. Paulozzi, how do alcohol and drugs affect our ability to drive?

[Dr. Paulozzi] Well, when you've been drinking or using drugs, you are not as coordinated as a driver and you don't react as fast to hazards. Plus, you may take more risks than you would take if you were sober and make poor decisions. I might add that this doesn't just apply to the drivers; it also applies to pedestrians and bicyclists who are using the roads and are impaired in the same way.

[Matthew Reynolds] How many crashes involve drivers who have been drinking or using drugs?

[Dr. Paulozzi] Well, there are thousands of them and it's really hard to know the exact number. But we do know that in the United States in recent years it's about 39% of the fatal crashes that involve some alcohol. As far as drugs go, past studies

have shown that anywhere from five to 25% of drivers who are in crashes have drugs in their systems.

[Matthew Reynolds] What is the typical profile of the person who uses alcohol or drugs and then gets behind the wheel?

[Dr. Paulozzi] We find both teenagers and people over the age of 75 who have both alcohol and drugs in their systems after crashes. But the highest usage of alcohol seems to be among men who are 21 to 24 years old. Motorcycle drivers tend to have greater levels of alcohol than passenger car drivers and men generally have higher levels of usage of alcohol than women do. For drugs, men have higher levels of usage as well, but the rates vary with the age of the man involved. Younger men tend to have higher levels of the illicit drugs, like marijuana, whereas men 35 years of age or older tend to be found more often with prescription medications.

[Matthew Reynolds] Well, let's talk specifically about alcohol related crashes. You've just completed an in-depth study of fatal crashes in West Virginia. What did you find?

[Dr. Paulozzi] Well, my co-authors in the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner for West Virginia and I looked at alcohol and drug test results in people dying in that state in crashes in 2004 and 2005. With respect to alcohol, among the fatalities, we found that 32% of them had some alcohol in their blood after the crash. And 28% had a level of alcohol in their blood that was illegal to drive with, that is a blood alcohol concentration equal to or greater than .08. In general, men and younger victims of these fatal crashes had more alcohol in their system and drivers had more than passengers did.

[Matthew Reynolds] And what about drug related crashes?

[Dr. Paulozzi] Well, these results were more interesting and more novel, really. About 26% of the people dying had one kind of drug or another in their system and that percent is similar to the percent that had the illegal alcohol levels in their system. About 8% of these road victims had two or more different kinds of drugs in their blood at the time of the death. And for drugs, the highest rates, a prevalence rate is what we call it, were in those 35 to 54 years of age.

[Matthew Reynolds] How has the picture changed for drug-impaired driving in the United States in recent years?

[Dr. Paulozzi] Well, we think that the picture may be changing in the United States with the increasing proportion of the drugs found in prescription drugs. Prescription drugs now may be found more commonly than illegal drugs in people in some locales. And this is a change from the 80s and early 1990s when marijuana might have been the most commonly found drug.

[Matthew Reynolds] Why are we finding these kinds of drugs now in fatal crashes?

[Dr. Paulozzi] Since the 1990s and on into this current decade there's been a dramatic increase really in the use and the abuse of certain kinds of prescription drugs. Included in this category are the painkillers and the drugs that are used to suppress anxiety.

[Matthew Reynolds] What would you recommend to people who are taking these drugs and how can they be safe on the road?

[Dr. Paulozzi] I think the first message should be, don't take illegal drugs or prescription drugs recreationally. Second, heed the warnings from doctors and pharmacists, and the warnings on the prescription bottles, about operating machinery, including driving cars, when using certain medications. Be especially careful when you first start taking some kinds of drugs or start taking an increased dose, because you can be more impaired when your body has not gotten accustomed to the medication. And finally, if you feel you are impaired, a designated driver is always a good way to go.

[Matthew Reynolds] Thanks, Dr. Paulozzi, for taking the time to talk with us today.

[Dr. Paulozzi] You're welcome, my pleasure.

[Matthew Reynolds] Well, that's it for this week's show. Don't forget to join us next week. Until then, be well. This is Matthew Reynolds for A Cup of Health with CDC.

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