

Drinking and Driving: A Deadly Combination

In 2004, an estimated 16,654 people were killed in alcohol-related crashes - an average of one almost every half-hour, according to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). These deaths made up about 39 percent of the 42,800 total traffic fatalities. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for children from 2 to 14 years of age, according to the NHTSA.

Through education, increased law enforcement and stiffer penalties, the number of alcohol-related traffic crashes can be reduced.

What you can do to protect yourself and others:

If you drink, be responsible. When with a group, choose a designated driver. Having one person agree to drink only non-alcoholic beverages and provide transportation for other members of the group can save lives.

As a host, here are some things you can do to ensure responsible drinking at a social function:

- Provide plenty of non-alcoholic beverages.
- Do not pressure guests to drink.
- Serve food to slow the rate of absorption of alcohol.
- Stop serving alcohol at least one hour before the party is over.
- If guests drink too much, call a cab or arrange a ride with a sober driver.

How to detect a drunk driver

According to law enforcement officials, drivers under the influence of alcohol often display certain characteristics, which can include:

- Making wide turns
- Weaving, swerving, drifting or straddling the center line.
- Almost striking an object or vehicle
- Driving on the wrong side of the road
- Driving at a very slow speed
- Stopping without cause
- Braking erratically
- Responding slowly to traffic signals
- Turning abruptly or illegally
- Driving after dark with headlights off.

Please keep these characteristics in mind to avoid a dangerous situation. If you are in front of an impaired driver, move to your right and let him or her pass. If the driver is in front of you, stay a safe distance behind. If the driver is coming at you, slow down, move to the right and stop. Once you are a safe distance from the impaired driver, call 9-1-1 or the police. Do not attempt to stop the impaired driver's vehicle yourself.

Stricter laws can help too

The work Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) does helps reduce impaired driving. MADD suggests passage and enforcement of laws that would:

- Enforce the minimum drinking age in all states
- Require that convicted impaired drivers be subject to alcohol testing prior to reinstatement of their driver's license (This would be effective in getting the chronic impaired driver off the roads.)
- Enact administrative license revocation laws in all states allowing arresting police officers to automatically suspend a driver's license if the driver is found to exceed the legal blood alcohol content (BAC) limit or if they refuse to take a breath test
- Set up a graduated license system where a newly licensed driver is only given certain driving privileges. As the driver matures, these privileges would increase.
- Suspend the license of underage drinkers found driving with any measurable level of alcohol in their blood. If a driver is under 21, any alcohol in the bloodstream is illegal.
- Increase roadside sobriety checkpoints. These checkpoints would catch drivers in the act and be an effective deterrent.