

# Drinking and Driving

## A dangerous combination

Driving while under the influence of alcohol (or drugs) can be extremely dangerous to the driver, the vehicle passengers, pedestrians and occupants of other vehicles. During 2004, alcohol related motor vehicle crashes killed 16,694\* people in the U.S. and injured thousands and destroyed millions of lives. According to the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA), all of these deaths and injuries were preventable.

Alcohol consumption affects brain functions, impairs judgment and inhibits behavior. A blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.08% is the legal limit in most states. A person can be considered "legally drunk" by BAC even if they do not 'feel' the effects of the alcohol that they have consumed. An intoxicated person may experience slurred speech, glassy or bloodshot eyes, poor balance, lack of coordination, slowed reactions, difficulty comprehending, clumsiness, disorientation, combativeness, impulsive behavior, lowered inhibitions and poor decision making. According to the NHTSA, drivers under the influence of alcohol often display certain characteristics when on the road:

- 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
- Driving at an excessive rate of speed
- Stopping without cause
- Braking erratically
- Responding slowly to traffic signals
- Turning abruptly or illegally
- Driving after dark with headlights off

"Driving while impaired (DWI)", "Driving under the influence (DUI)", or "Operating under the influence (OUI)", all drunk driving offenses have varied punishments ranging from suspended/revoked license, fines, multi-tiered penalties based on BAC at the time of arrest, mandatory attendance of drunk driver's education classes, alcohol counseling, probation, vehicle forfeit, and/or incarceration.

### *If you drink, drink responsibly and in moderation*

Research has shown that an alcoholic beverage, a glass of red wine, a beer or liquor in moderation with a meal can be part of a healthy lifestyle. When socializing in a group, select a designated driver, do not let alcohol consumption be the focus of the event, alternate between an alcoholic beverage and a soft drink, do not have more than one alcoholic beverage per hour, do not participate in drinking games or drinking contests.

When hosting a social function; provide ample non-alcoholic beverages, do not encourage/pressure guests to consume alcohol, serve food to slow the rate of absorption of alcohol and stop serving alcohol one hour before the party ends.

### *Education and prevention*

Teach young adults the consequences of drinking and driving, binge drinking, be familiar with youth DUI legislation, do not provide alcohol to persons under age 21. Let's not let today's youths become tomorrow's drunk drivers.

To protect yourself,

Know your alcohol intake limit, don't drink and drive, don't ride with anyone who has had too much to drink, volunteer to be the designated driver and always use a safety belt.

To protect others,

Volunteer to be a designated driver, do not condone or approve of excessive alcohol consumption, inebriated behavior is potentially dangerous and never amusing, don't let friends drive drunk. There are numerous ways to prevent an intoxicated person from driving. You can save lives by: taking the car keys from an intoxicated person to prevent them from becoming a drunk driver, offer to have a 'sober designated driver' drive the intoxicated person to their destination, call a cab or have them take public transportation.

Increased public awareness, alcohol education, support of stronger regulations, and sobriety checkpoints can lead to significant progress in the ongoing battle to eliminate drunk driving and to save thousands of lives.

For more information on drinking and driving, visit [www.stopimpaireddriving.org](http://www.stopimpaireddriving.org) or [www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov)

If you would like to discuss your alcohol consumption, you can contact LifeWatch EAP for confidential assistance.

\*National Highway Transportation Safety Administration National Center for Statistics and Analysis, August 2005, Traffic Safety Facts