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Volume 2, Issue 12 December 15, 2022

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National Impaired Driving Prevention Month

On November 30, 2022, like so many before him, President Biden proclaimed the month of December as National Impaired Driving Prevention Month. This began in 1981 as National Drunk & Drugged Driving Prevention Month stemming from one tragic accident.

On May 3, 1980, Cari Lightner, a thirteen-year-old girl, was struck and killed by Clarence Busch. When he was arrested, police found that less than a week before, Busch was involved in a drunken hit-and-run. At the time, driving while under the influence was just a misdemeanor. Cari's mother, Candy Lightner, took action and created the non-profit known as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). Candy pushed for a stricter definition of drunk driving, had legislatures pass laws and prosecution that included jail time and licenses suspensions, and had President Reagan establish 21 as the minimum legal drinking age.

From this movement, there were a lot of changes. In 1990, the Supreme Court held in *Michigan Department of State Police v. Sitz* that sobriety checkpoints on public roads do not offend the U.S. Constitution. By July 2004, all states had adopted .08 as the legal blood alcohol limit. Additionally, MADD and other institutions played a large role in educating the public on the risks of drinking and driving. These acts lead to a significant decrease in alcohol-related crashes. However, drivers with blood alcohol content levels of .08 or higher are responsible for about 1/3 of all traffic fatalities – a total of 10,000 lives each year.

Despite great strides in legislation and public awareness on the issue, a 2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health showed that over 26 million people ages 16 and older drove under the influence of alcohol or illicit drugs, with people ages 20 to 25 accounting for 17% of those impaired drivers. On average 27 people die each day due to drunk driving, but from Thanksgiving to New Year's Eve this number increases to over 40 people a day.

Between traveling to visit family and friends, shopping for gifts, and heading to holiday parties, there are more people on the road during this time. There are also more parties and celebrations with plenty of holiday cheer in the bottom of bottles and glasses. It creates the perfect storm for impaired driving and its fatal consequences.

Historically, Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve have been known as the most dangerous holidays to drive, making December the obvious choice for Impaired Driving Awareness month.

Impaired driving includes drunk driving, but also distracted and drugged driving. One of the biggest causes of distracted driving is texting. Even if you look down at your phone for five seconds while driving 55 miles per hour, you would have traveled the length of a football field without looking. Many people think they can read and write a quick text while driving without problem, but one study found that teens who texted while driving spent about 10% of their driving time outside their lane. Texting while driving produces the same effects to one's reaction speed that drinking four beers in a single hour would. Even though cell phone use while driving is prohibited, 16% of drivers still text when driving.

Additionally, just like alcohol, a variety of drugs can impair one's reaction time, coordination, judgment, and vision. On average, 12.6 million people drive under the influence of drugs each year with marijuana as the most commonly found drug in accidents, which was often paired with alcohol. However, not all intoxication is intended. As people get older, their bodies begin to process substances, like prescription drugs, differently. And with mental decline, people may take more or less, or the wrong combination of prescribed medication resulting in unintended intoxication while driving.

A campaign from the Fairfield Police Department in Connecticut for National Impaired Driving Prevention Month

These statistics can be daunting, but impaired driving accidents and fatalities are 100% preventable. Celebrating the holidays is a great way to make memories with friends and family, and doing so responsibly only makes these memories sweeter. I encourage everyone to prioritize safe driving this holiday season and beyond.

Happy Holidays!

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Plan ahead. Volunteer as a designated driver. If you volunteer, remember that coffee and water do not sober you up - only time can do that. The best strategy is to not drink, but if you do, only drink little and stop drinking well before you get behind the wheel.

Use a ride share app. Ride share apps are great to avoid impaired driving altogether. Many now allow you to add different stops and split fares. If you are hosting a holiday party, consider working with ride-share apps to offer vouchers for your guests to use so that they have a safe ride home.

Offer to drive your kid. Teenagers may or may not drink. However, even if your kid doesn't drink, she may feel unable to decline a ride with an impaired friend due to peer-pressure. When your kid heads out to a holiday party or get-together, offer to drive your kid to make sure they get home safe.

Look at your phone settings. Many phones now have a setting to turn off notifications while driving to reduce the temptation to look at your phone or respond to texts. This setting will even notify the sender that you are driving and will respond later. If your phone does not have this setting, there are several apps that can help. One app, SAFE 2 SAFE even rewards drivers for not using their phones on the road.

Wait and see. Read the side effects of a medication and plan accordingly. Some over the counter medications like cold medicines or sleeping aides can cause drowsiness, nausea, or blurred vision, all of which impair your ability to drive. When starting a new medication, avoid driving until you know how it affects you.