

# CONNECTICUT Clearinghouse

A Program of Wheeler Clinic

800.232.4424 (Voice/TTY) 860.793.9813 (Fax)  
www.ctclearinghouse.org



## Preventing Alcohol-Impaired Driving

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

Impaired driving occurs when a person operates a motor vehicle while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. It is estimated that two in every five Americans will be involved in an alcohol-related crash at some time in their lives. Numbers are not available for other drug-related fatalities, but studies indicate that marijuana and other drugs also affect judgment and motor functions, making driving under the influence of drugs other than alcohol dangerous.

While alcohol-related crashes are declining, their numbers remain unacceptably high. Approximately 500,000 persons per year are injured in alcohol-related crashes. On average, one person is injured every minute.

Much of the reduction in crashes related to impaired driving is a result of prevention initiatives at the federal, state and community levels.

They include raising the minimum alcohol purchase age laws, raising alcohol prices, lowering blood alcohol concentration limits, administrative license revocation, establishing roadside sobriety checkpoints, implementing designated driver programs, developing responsible alcoholic beverage server programs and starting voluntary youth programs.



### Raising Minimum Drinking Age Laws

The national minimum purchase age for alcoholic beverages is 21. In 1984, Congress passed the National Minimum Purchase Age Act to encourage each state to enact a minimum legal purchase age of 21. Because of that change in alcohol policy, thousands of young people are alive today who would otherwise have died in traffic crashes.

Despite reductions in alcohol-related crashes, young people remain especially vulnerable to the threat of alcohol and other drug-impaired drivers and driving. Traffic crashes are the leading killer of young people, and of these crashes, more than one-half are alcohol-related. In a national survey, nearly half of 10<sup>th</sup> graders and a third of 8<sup>th</sup> graders reported having ridden during the past month with a driver who had used alcohol or other drugs before taking the wheel.

### Raising Alcohol Prices

Changes in price, including federal, state and local taxes, may affect both alcohol consumption patterns and alcohol-involved automobile crashes. While reducing impaired driving through raising alcohol prices by taxation or other means has been opposed for financial reasons, it appears that higher alcohol prices lead to fewer impaired driving crashes, as well as to less alcohol consumption by underage youth. It has been projected that nationwide, over 1,000 lives of 18 to 20 year olds could be saved annually if the federal excise tax were indexed to inflation. In terms of fatal car crashes, a tax amounting to approximately 35% of the retail price of beer would be expected to cut the number of alcohol-related crash deaths among 16 to 21 year olds by about 50%.

### Lowering BAC Limits

The legal intoxication level in most states is 0.10 percent blood alcohol concentration (BAC). But alcohol depresses the central nervous system, causing slowed reactions, and one's ability to drive is affected long before a BAC of 0.10 is reached. Therefore, many states are considering lowering their BAC limits as a prevention measure. Lower BAC limits could be a powerful tool to prevent alcohol-impaired driving. Those states that have adopted lower BAC limits for minors have already experienced decreases in fatalities among this age group.

Recommendations for blood alcohol concentration limits are 0.04 percent for drivers 21 and over and 0.00 for drivers under 21 (*Healthy People 2000: National Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Objectives*).

### Administrative License Revocation

Administrative license revocation (ALR) allows an arresting officer to immediately confiscate the driver's license of a driver who is found with a BAC at or above the legally set limit or who refuses to take a BAC test. The officer usually then issues a temporary driving permit valid for a short time, often from 15 to 20 days, and notifies the offender of his or her right to an administrative hearing to appeal the revocation. If there is no appeal or if the revocation is upheld, the offender loses his or her driving license for a set period (90 days in most states for a first offense, longer for subsequent offenses).

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Research shows that ALR laws can prevent impaired driving. One study found that ALR laws reduced nighttime fatal traffic crashes (which are likely to involve alcohol) by about 9%.

## Sobriety Checkpoints

The practice of setting up police roadblocks to check for alcohol-impaired drivers deters drinking and driving. Contrary to popular perception, checkpoints are not predominately intended to catch alcohol-impaired drivers. Rather, their



purpose is to deter alcohol-impaired driving by creating the public perception that impaired drivers are likely to be caught and punished for the offense.

Experience with sobriety checkpoints in the United States is relatively limited,

reflecting concerns with the constitutionality of stopping motorists at random. In 1990 the U.S. Supreme Court decided that such activities did not violate the Constitution.

To maximize the deterrent effect of checkpoints, the nature and purpose of the checkpoints need to be made clear to the public. In addition, checkpoints must be conducted frequently, receive adequate media attention and they must be included within the context of a wider enforcement strategy.

## Designated Driver Programs

The designated driver concept encourages individuals who drink alcoholic beverages with companions to designate one member of the group to abstain from alcohol in order to drive the other group members to their destinations. By encouraging drivers to remain alcohol-free, the designated driver both promotes a social norm of not mixing alcohol with driving and fosters the legitimacy of the non-drinking role.

While the public has supported the designated driver concept, its effectiveness in reducing impaired driving has not been evaluated. In addition, some have suggested that designated drivers may encourage increased drinking among those who are not driving. Until the effectiveness of the designated driver concept is determined, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention encourage the use of designated drivers by the public and designated driver programs by servers of alcoholic beverages.

## Responsible Beverage Service Programs

Programs to promote the responsible service of alcoholic beverages are intended to change the environment surrounding drinking in both commercial establishments and private parties, and to reduce underage sales and the risk of intoxication. As part of these programs, establishments practice strict age identification, discourage intoxication, improve service to the customer and provide attractive non-alcoholic alternative beverages.

Some states have laws requiring all those serving alcoholic beverages to be trained. Other areas rely on cooperative agreements between the hospitality industry and the health and safety communities to promote voluntary training.

## Voluntary Youth Programs

It is important for youth prevention programs to present clear messages, with the central message that no one under 21 should drink alcohol and no one should use drugs. However, many popular programs with “mixed messages” have been encouraged by well-meaning school administrators, community groups and even federal agencies. Examples of prevention programs for teenagers that do not give clear abstinence messages are those that distribute BAC charts; parent-child contracts that agree that “no questions will be asked” if the child drinks; and programs or materials that encourage youth to make “responsible decisions” in regard to alcohol and other drugs without making it clear that the only acceptable decision for youth is to abstain.

A large percentage of high school students are binge drinkers, with over one-third reporting the consumption of five or more drinks in a row on at least one occasion in the past two weeks. Making it easier for these youths to travel or guaranteeing “no questions will be asked” by parents is enabling rather than helping them. Consequently, clear “no use” messages are recommended for all voluntary youth programs.

Source:

The National Clearinghouse for Alcohol & Drug Information  
[www.health.org/govpubs/phd627/impaired.htm](http://www.health.org/govpubs/phd627/impaired.htm)