

Official: Cannabis use impairs driving as much as alcohol says first of its kind study while drug's legality continues to spread

By Dailymail.com Reporter

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A first-of-its-kind study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse has determined that smoking marijuana can, in fact, adversely affect driving ability.

The comprehensive government study put 18 marijuana users behind the wheel of a sophisticated driving simulator after they were given different combinations of marijuana, alcohol or a placebo.

The data revealed that, at certain blood concentrations, marijuana's active chemical THC affects weaving within a road lane in a similar way to a blood alcohol level of .08, the legal limit in many states.

The study was the first to make a sophisticated, scientific examination of the differences in effects of marijuana versus alcohol while driving.

'One of the things we know happens with cannabis is that it reduces your field of vision and you get tunnel vision, so you're unable to react as quickly,' Marilyn Huestis of the NIDA told KABC.

Despite this, drugged driving penalties vary state-to-state as compared to those for drunk driving.

In Colorado, where recreational marijuana is legal, a first offense high driver can expect a mandatory minimum sentence of two days in jail. A first offense DUI can get you up to a year.

The study also found that pot and alcohol have more of an impact on driving when used together, TIME notes.

They found that when people drank alcohol before inhaling marijuana, the level of THC in their blood was 'significantly higher than without alcohol'.

The combination of cannabis and alcohol raises the chance of crashing more than either substance by itself, they added, pointing to previous research which came to this conclusion.

'We know cannabis is primarily found with a low dose of alcohol,' Huestis said. 'Many young people have a couple beers and then cannabis.'

And this worries researchers in a country where the drug has become legal in some states, a trend that is likely to grow.

'The significantly higher blood THC values with alcohol possibly explain increased performance impairment observed from cannabis-alcohol combinations,' said Huestis.

She added she hopes the findings will inform discussions around legislation on driving on drugs.

Previously, experts have warned that the increased concentration of THC in today's cannabis compared to previous years means smokers are more likely to experience negative effects.

These include anxiety, confusion, panic attacks, hallucinations or extreme paranoia, with women more at risk than men.