

Road safety factsheet:

Drug driving

December 2023

Introduction

Drug driving is a serious road safety problem, with drug impairment (both legal and illegal) contributing to road crashes. In 2022, a driver or rider being impaired by illegal or medicinal drugs resulted in 2,715 people being injured. Of those, 97 people were killed and 926 were seriously injured¹. Casualty statistics for the last four years are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Casualties in reported collisions by severity where illicit or medicinal drug use was a contributory factor, 2019-2022, Great Britain¹

	Killed	Serious	Slight	All
2019	92	737	1,449	2,278
2020	92	721	1,477	2,290
2021	79	806	1,612	2,497
2022	97	926	1,692	2,715

From the table, it can be seen that there has been no improvement in casualty figures in recent years, with casualties increasing slightly year on year. Despite enforcement, education and law changes, drug driving is still a major road safety issue, with 53.6 per cent of drivers stopped on suspicion of drug driving testing positive for drugs. Nationally, 79 per cent of offenders who tested positive for drink or drugs were male and 77 per cent were 25 years old or over².

Drugs, whether they are prescribed or recreational, legal or illegal, can have a significant and varied effect on an individual's ability to drive safely.¹ Some drugs, such as cannabis, can result in a driver's reaction time being slowed, meaning they are less aware, drive slowly, and are less able to respond to hazards in adequate time.³

¹ Department for Transport. RAS0701: Contributory factors: Casualties, collisions and road user types, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/reported-road-accidents-vehicles-and-casualties-tables-for-great-britain#factors-contributing-to-collisions-and-casualties-ras07>: Accessed December 2023

² NPCC (2023) Nearly 9,000 drivers caught drink or drug driving, <https://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/nearly-9-000-drivers-caught-drink-or-drug-driving-in-six-week-police-operation#>: Accessed December 2023

³ Furlan A (2018) Even if cannabis is legal, please don't toké and drive. The Conversation website. <https://theconversation.com/even-if-cannabis-is-legal-please-dont-toke-and-drive-97992>: Accessed December 2023.

Drugs such as cocaine, however, have a different but still incredibly dangerous effect, leading to the driver becoming more erratic (despite any fatigue), resulting in increased risk-taking behaviour and a reduction in the ability to accurately judge situations.⁴

The law

In 2012, a new offence was announced by the Government in order to tackle drug-driving cases wherein it was difficult to prove if a certain drug impaired the driver, causing prosecutions to fail. The offence means that individuals cannot drive if they have a particular drug in their body above a specified threshold limit. The Government decided on these limits in March 2015 after carrying out a drug-driving consultation and using a report published by experts⁵.

[Drug-driving law](#) in England, Scotland and Wales can be summarised as follows:

- It is illegal to drive if you are unfit to do so as a result of taking legal or illegal drugs
- It is illegal to drive if you have certain levels of illegal drugs in your blood, regardless of whether these drugs have affected your driving.

Anyone driving while unfit through drugs, whether illegal or prescribed or over-the-counter medicines, can still be prosecuted under the previous law, which remains in place.

In [Northern Ireland](#), it is illegal to drive if you are impaired by drugs, irrespective of if these drugs are illegal, prescribed, or bought over the counter.

The police can, and do, conduct roadside tests to help them assess whether a driver may be impaired.

Illegal drugs

The law sets very low limits for eight illegal drugs, such as cannabis, cocaine, ecstasy and ketamine, so taking even a very small amount could put a person over the limit. Table 2 shows eight illegal drugs and their threshold limit as set by the Government. These eight drugs have been given a “zero tolerance” approach, and the threshold levels mean that an individual cannot claim accidental exposure.

⁴ Emergency Medical Services Authority. How do Drugs Affect Driving? EMSA website. <https://emsaonline.com/resource-library/summer-safety-tips/how-do-drugs-affect-driving/>: Accessed December 2023

⁵ Department for Transport. Changes to drug driving law. GOV.UK website. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/drug-driving#table-of-drugs-and-limits>. Updated August 27, 2017. Accessed December 2023

Table 2: Illegal drugs and their limits; (source: [DfT, 2017](#))

Illegal' drugs ('accidental exposure' – zero tolerance approach)	Threshold limit in microgrammes per litre of blood (µg/L)
benzoylecgonine	50
cocaine	10
delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (cannabis)	2
ketamine	20
lysergic acid diethylamide	1
methylamphetamine	10
Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA)	10
6-monoacetylmorphine (heroin)	5

Prescription drugs⁶

The Department for Transport (DfT) states that an individual should talk to their doctor about whether they should drive if they have been prescribed any of the following medications:

- Amphetamine
- Clozapine
- Diazepam
- Flunitrazepam
- Lorazepam
- Oxazepam
- Temazepam
- Methadone
- Morphine

If an individual has been prescribed any of these medications by a healthcare professional and followed their advice on how to take them, they can drive if the medications are not causing them to be unfit, even if the medications are above specified limits.

Table 3 shows eight medicinal drugs and their threshold limits. These eight drugs were chosen to have defined limits as they are used commonly for medicinal purposes, and their limits were decided by using a road safety risk approach.

⁶ Gov.uk (undated) Drugs and driving: the law, <https://www.gov.uk/drug-driving-law>: accessed July 2023

Table 3: Prescription drugs and their limits (source [DfT, 2017](#))

Medicinal' drugs (risk based approach)	Threshold limit in blood (µg/L)
clonazepam	50
diazepam	550
flunitrazepam	300
lorazepam	100
methadone	500
morphine	80
oxazepam	300
temazepam	1,000
Separate approach (to balance its risk)	Threshold limit in blood (µg/L)
amphetamine	250

Penalties for drug driving⁷

If a police officer suspects that a driver is impaired by drug use, they can stop them and conduct a field assessment test. This assessment consists of several tests, one of which is requesting that the driver walk in a straight line. A roadside drug test, called Drugwipe, can be used to test for cannabis and cocaine. If the driver tests positive for one of these drugs, they will be taken to a police station for blood testing. If you're convicted of drug driving, you may get:

- a minimum one-year driving ban
- an unlimited fine
- up to six months in prison
- a criminal record

Your driving licence will also show you've been convicted for drug driving. This will last for 11 years. The maximum penalty for causing death by careless driving under the influence of drugs is life imprisonment.

The effects of drugs on safe driving

In the same way as drink driving, drug driving can be extremely dangerous, putting not only the driver at risk, but also their passengers and other road users. Drugs have wide and varying effects on individuals, and these effects can be difficult to determine, due to individual factors and the fact that several types of drugs are often taken at once or mixed.⁸

⁷ Gov.uk, Penalty point, fines and driving bans. Drugs and driving: the law, <https://www.gov.uk/drug-driving-law>: Accessed July 2023

⁸ National Institute on Drug Abuse. Drugged Driving Drugfacts. Drugabuse.gov website. <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/drugged-driving>: Accessed December 2023.

The following table, Table 4, identifies some key categories⁹ of drugs and outlines their effects on an individual's ability to drive safely. Examples of the different categories of drugs are provided, and these can either be prescribed or recreational, and legal or illegal.

Table 4: Drug categories and their effects on safe driving¹⁰

Drug category	Examples	Effects on driving
Stimulants ¹¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ecstasy, cocaine Anabolic steroids Dextroamphetamine, methylphenidate 	Stimulant drugs can result in an individual feeling a boost to their wellbeing, making them feel more awake, excited and happy. These feelings can cause the individual to feel confused and distracted, meaning they are unable to give their full attention to the driving task. ¹² Further effects of stimulant drugs include impulsiveness, risk taking, restlessness and coordination problems. All of these effects can severely inhibit the ability of a driver to notice and respond to hazards on the road.
Depressants ¹³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alcohol, diazepam, temazepam Pregabalin Chlorphenamine Zolpidem 	Depressants have a sedating effect, slowing down the central nervous system and resulting in relaxation, drowsiness, and impaired motor functions and reaction times. Higher levels of depressants can cause further effects, including disorientation and forgetfulness. ¹⁴ These effects can severely impair an individual's driving ability, with studies showing that they can result in significantly impaired concentration and reaction times, and increased lane and speed changes.
Opioids and opiates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Oxycodone, fentanyl, tramadol, hydrocodone¹⁵ Codeine 	As opioids have a sedating effect, they can reduce an individual's level of consciousness, making them feel sleepy and less aware. This has a negative effect on driving, which requires a high level of cognition to be carried out safely. Opioid drugs frequently result in a reduction in pupil diameter, negatively affecting vision and the ability to adapt to different lighting situations. Furthermore, if an individual is using opioids to manage pain, it is likely that they will be taking other medications alongside the opioids, which can even further exacerbate driving impairment.

⁹ Mind. Recreational drugs and alcohol: What types of drugs are there? Mind website. <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/drugs-recreational-drugs-alcohol/types-of-recreational-drug/>: Accessed December 2023

¹⁰ Alcohol and Drug Foundation (2023), Depressants, <https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/#list>: Accessed December 2023

¹¹ Catalyst. Types of drugs. Catalyst website. <https://www.catalystsupport.org.uk/types-of-drugs/>: Accessed December 2023

¹² Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (2017) The Effects of Psychoactive Prescription Drugs on Driving. <https://www.ccsa.ca/sites/default/files/2019-04/CCSA-Psychoactive-Prescription-Drugs-and-Driving-Report-2017-en.pdf>: Accessed December 2023

¹³ Alcohol and Drug Foundation (2023), Depressants, <https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/depressants/>: Accessed December 2023

¹⁴ Traffic Injury Research Foundation. Effects of Central Nervous System Depressants on Driving. Drug-Impaired Driving Learning Centre. <https://druggeddriving.tirf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/DIDL-CNS-depressants-Factsheet-6.pdf>: Accessed January 2024

¹⁵ The Johns Hopkins University. Opioid Addiction: What Are Opioids? Johns Hopkins Medicine website. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/opioids/what-are-opioids.html>: Accessed December 2023

<p>Hallucinogens^{16, 17}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LSD • Psilocybin • MDMA 	<p>Hallucinogens distort the messages that are sent to the brain, causing altered sensory perception and a range of other effects, including hallucinations (visual or auditory), dilated pupils and increased heart rate. Studies have shown that hallucinogens cause major impairment in the skills that are critical for safe driving. Drivers who have taken hallucinogens are less able to adjust their speed or signal correctly. Hallucinogens can also result in a reduction in coordination, blurred vision and confusion, all severely detrimental to safe driving.¹⁸ Furthermore, distorted sensory perceptions mean that drivers are less able to judge speed, distance, and hazards correctly.¹⁹</p>
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When considering the effects of different drugs on driving, is it important to consider the effects that arise when multiple drugs are combined. This is known as polydrug use, and can occur in several situations, such as when alcohol and prescription or illegal drugs are combined, when several prescription drugs are combined, or when illegal drugs have been made with several other drugs in order to make them cheaper. Polydrug use can be extremely dangerous when driving, as the mixing of effects of the different drugs can result in major driving impairment. For example, combining two depressants can cause a dangerous increase in effects, such as extremely slow reaction time and distorted perception.²⁰

The combination of particular drugs when driving, such as alcohol and cannabis, is on the rise, and studies have shown drivers who have taken both alcohol and cannabis are more likely to make a driving error than if they had taken either one alone. One study investigated drivers who had been involved in a fatal collision and tested positive for both alcohol and cannabis. Drivers who had committed a potentially unsafe driving action (UDA) were compared with controls (those who had not committed a UDA, but were still involved in a fatal collision, and were positive for alcohol and cannabis). It was found that for each 0.01 blood alcohol content (BAC) unit, the chance of a UDA increased by 9-11 per cent. If a driver was positive for THC (the key constituent of cannabis), their chance of committing a UDA increased by 16 per cent. However, compared to alcohol or THC alone, when both were present, the chance of a driver committing a UDA increased by 8-10 per cent for each 0.01 BAC increase,²¹ likely resulting in a significantly increased chance of being involved in a collision.

¹⁶ National Institutes of Health (2019). Hallucinogens DrugFacts. National Institute on Drug Abuse website.

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/hallucinogens>: Accessed December 2023

¹⁷ Traffic Injury Research Foundation. Effects of Hallucinogens on Driving. Drug-Impaired Driving Learning Centre.

<https://druggeddriving.tirf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/DIDLH-Hallucinogens-Factsheet-4.pdf>: Accessed December 2023

¹⁸ Alcohol and Drug Foundation (2020). Drugs and driving. ADF website. <https://adf.org.au/insights/drugs-and-driving/>: Accessed December 2023

¹⁹ Government of Western Australia. Drugs and driving don't mix. Mental Health Commission website.

<https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/media/1233/drugs-and-driving-dont-mix-booklet.pdf>: Accessed December 2023

²⁰ Marillier M, Verstraete A. G. Driving under the influence of drugs. *WIREs Forensic Science*.

2019;1(3). https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/wfs2.1326?saml_referrer. Accessed December 2023

²¹ Dubois S. et al. The combined effects of alcohol and cannabis on driving: Impact on crash risk. *Forensic Science International*.

2015;248(1):94-100. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0379073814005350>: Accessed December 2023



accidents don't have to happen

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents