

## The dangers of driving while medicated

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Prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) drugs can affect your ability to drive safely. Side effects from some of these drugs can be as dangerous as driving while intoxicated or under the influence of illegal drugs.

Medical professionals and vehicle safety experts agree that driving while using some prescription medications and OTC drugs can be dangerous. That is because some of these drugs have side effects that can impair your vision, cause dizziness, make you drowsy, slow your movement, or cause fainting.

Some of the most widely used prescription and OTC medicines that can have impairing effects include:

- Pain relievers
- Antidepressants
- Anti-anxiety medications
- Cold and cough medicines
- Allergy medications

### Studies provide insight into danger

While the dangers of driving under the influence of prescription and OTC drugs seem apparent, the full impact of the problem is not clear. Most impaired driving studies focus on fatigue, alcohol or illegal drug use, not prescription and OTC drugs. A few studies, however, provide some insight.

- A University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center study showed that 8 to 10 percent of drivers involved in fatigue-related accidents reported taking prescription or OTC medication.
- A 2004 Centers for Disease Control (CDC) study showed that 9.4 percent of drivers involved in fatal vehicle crashes in West Virginia tested positive for prescription or OTC drugs.
- Between 1987 and 2001, the National Transportation Safety Board investigated 150 fatal accidents where prescription or OTC drugs were suspected to be a contributing factor.
- Numerous studies show that popular allergy and cold medicines containing sedating antihistamines can cause impairment, similar to driving while intoxicated, sometimes without the driver ever feeling impaired.

Occasional advisories by government agencies and other organizations warn against the potential side effects of some medications. For example, one of the more recent advisories published by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA), serves as a reminder that prescription drugs and driving do not always mix.

### A growing problem

Prescription and OTC drug use while driving is likely to become a bigger safety issue in the future. One reason is that Americans are getting older. A growing population of older drivers means more drivers will be using medications, sometimes in combinations that can lead to side effects that can impair a driver's ability to drive safely.

There is also evidence that the recreational use of prescription drugs is increasing. The 2004 CDC study suggested that beginning in the 1990s there has been a noticeable increase in recreational use of prescription drugs, especially painkillers and anti-anxiety drugs. These drugs can lead to impairment that can make driving dangerous.

### Recommended precautions

Medical and safety professionals recommend the following precautions if you use prescription or OTC medicines while driving:

- Discuss potential side effects with your doctor and pharmacist. If you have more than one doctor, make sure each one is aware of all the medications you are taking.

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- Read all warning labels and instructions to learn what side effects to expect.
- Monitor yourself when first taking a medication, or increasing the dosage, to determine what side effects you might experience, before driving.
- Adjust the timing or amount of doses to avoid side effects while driving. If taking prescription drugs, consult with your doctor in advance.
- If available, use alternative medications that do not cause impairing side effects.
- Consider lifestyle changes that might lessen the need to use medications.

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