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Drugs As Big a Problem As Drinks for Drivers, Prevention Groups Say

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By **Kris Turner** - Drugged driving. No, not drunken driving, drugged driving.

Washington, D.C. - Scripps Howard Foundation Wire - infoZine - It's a problem officials want to be easily recognizable. According to a 2006 National Institute on Drug Abuse survey, about 9.5 million people 12 and older drove under the influence of illicit drugs.

Steven Gust, a special assistant to the director of the federal government's National Institute on Drug Abuse, said marijuana is a typical drug abused by drivers.

The Institute for Behavior and Health launched druggeddriving.org this month to help stop the problem. The Web site includes research, treatments and prevention.

"The bottom line is the lack of public awareness," said Robert DuPont, the institute's president. The institute is a nonprofit policy group that works to reduce substance abuse.

A study at a Maryland trauma center found that 34 percent of drivers brought in with injuries tested positive for drug use only, while 16 percent tested positive for alcohol only. The study, reported by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, is only one part of a national picture.

That more people tested positive for drug use is alarming, said Michael McEleney, assistant program manager for the Institute for Behavior and Health.

"Drugged driving does not receive the attention it deserves," he said, adding that the new Web site should help people understand the problem. "Of all the issues that come together, drugged driving falls through the cracks."

December is National Drunk and Drugged Driving Prevention Month.

People using drugs are not just a danger to themselves. They pose a threat to everyone else traveling on roads, McEleney said. People think about driving while under the influence of alcohol, but sometimes don't give a second thought to driving after using drugs.

Part of the problem in fighting drugged driving stems from the difficulty in drug testing.

"You are dealing with multiple substances, as opposed to alcohol," Gust said. "Roadside testing by law enforcement has a long history of testing for alcohol. Part of the reason for that is it is one substance and easily detectable by breath."

DuPont said drug testing could require a person to take a blood, saliva, hair or urine test.

Drugged driving is a common problem among young people. The Institute on Drug Abuse reported vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death for people ages 15 to 20. In the study conducted in Maryland, 13.5 percent of adolescent drivers reported driving under the influence of marijuana on three or more occasions.

"Students are the most vulnerable population here," said Robert Walker, assistant program manager for the Institute for Behavior and Health. "Kids just don't realize that driving is the greatest danger to their lives and safety."

Most people have been educated about the dangers of drunken driving, but told the consequences of drugged driving, Gust said. People choose to have a designated driver if the drink, but not if they use drugs.

"Drugs impair all the skills that are necessary for safe driving," he said.

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