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Alcohol too

As we enjoy the festive season, we'll hear the usual messages from Police and Government about taking care on the roads – reminders to wear our seatbelts and cautions that if you drink and drive "you're a bloody idiot".

The road toll – deaths caused by car accidents – is closely monitored by the media during holiday periods. The Motor Accident Commission says that more than 20 per cent of drivers, riders and pedestrians killed have a blood alcohol concentration equal to or greater than 0.05 per cent.

Given that people tend to drink more at this time of year, or at least find more of a reason for indulging, the chances of more people drink driving can be higher. This is where random breath tests (RBTs) come into play. Police around Australia carry out these random roadside tests in a bid to catch those who shouldn't be driving. And while we all fear getting pulled over for one of these tests, there are some very real reasons for the RBT – alcohol makes you a bad driver.

UniSA Head of the School of Pharmacy and Medical Sciences, Professor Jason White, who previously worked with Drug and Alcohol Services and is often called upon as an expert

witness in drink driving court cases, says a significant portion of major motor vehicle accidents can be attributed to alcohol.

"Alcohol has two major and significant effects on people's driving," Prof White said.

"The first is that it impairs general functioning, so you've got slow reflexes, slow decision-making, you make more errors in operation of a motor vehicle and you miss more things such as signs.

"That means your overall functioning and coordination for operating a motor vehicle, functions that we take for granted but are quite complex, are diminished considerably.

"The second thing alcohol does, is it increases risk taking. People are more likely to engage in risky driving and the most obvious manifestation of that is speeding. Risky overtaking is also an example.

"So you have a combination of someone who tends to be a bit more impulsive and risk taking with their driving but at the same time is actually impaired in their ability to drive well. That combination makes alcohol a particularly bad drug to have when driving."

Figures from South Australian Police (SAPOL) show that in 2009, 36 per cent of people who died in a car accident in South Australia had a blood alcohol concentration of 0.05 per cent or higher; and most of these people were three times the legal limit. SAPOL also says that every

0.05 per cent increase of blood alcohol concentration above zero, doubles the risk of crashing when driving.

Prof White agrees, saying that research has shown there is more chance of having a car crash once you

get close to the 0.05 per cent limit. And obviously it gets worse as you drink more. He says people need to plan their transport options when they know they will be drinking.

"Once you get to quite a high blood alcohol concentration, particularly over 0.12 per cent, cognitive functioning is affected to the degree that people make very bad decisions - ones they wouldn't otherwise make," Prof White says.

"So if people are going to avoid risky driving, they need to have an idea of how many drinks they are going to have on an occasion before they start drinking,

Alcohol increases risk taking and impairs ability to drive well...that combination makes it a particularly bad drug *Professor Jason white*

risky for drivers



and plan accordingly. Once you start getting intoxicated, your ability to control your drinking, like your driving, is diminished.

"At holiday times, a number of people fall into that trap. They get past the point of making good decisions based on their judgment and they do things that they wouldn't normally."

Another factor according to Prof White, is that people's self-confidence can be exaggerated with alcohol and their cognitive functioning isn't very good, so they will dismiss something that is a valid risk.

And for those people who don't normally drink much and see the festive season as their chance to let loose, be warned – it is people who don't usually drink who will be most likely to get drunk quickly and make bad decisions.

Prof White also warns that while alcohol affects different people in different ways, the way that alcohol affects someone can vary from day-to-day.

"One day you might drink and your body eliminates the alcohol quite quickly and another day it eliminates much slower," he says.

"And we don't really know what factors determine that. This means there is a high level of unpredictability about the blood alcohol concentration a person will reach at any one time."

Another trap, Prof White says, is relying on how drunk you feel. He says the general way we feel is not an accurate indicator of our blood alcohol concentration and that in general, people will tend to underestimate it.

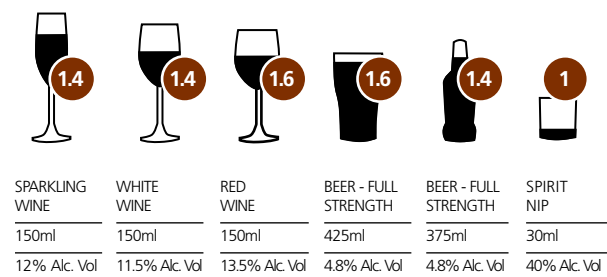
"When a person's blood alcohol concentration is falling, they often feel quite sober even though that concentration is still quite high," he said. "A classic example is a person getting up to drive the morning after drinking, and feeling very sober but still having a high blood alcohol concentration.

"So there is a danger in relying on how you feel and because the alcohol increases your confidence, you may feel as though you can handle it but it doesn't mean you can."

All in all, alcohol and driving are simply a bad combination with consequences that can be a lot more severe and personal than copping a fine or losing demerit points from your license.

By Katrina Phelps

Blood alcohol concentration (BAC) will vary according to a number of factors including gender, weight, level of fitness and age. Generally, two standard drinks in one hour will raise your BAC to 0.05% and one standard drink per hour after that will maintain that level.



No. standard drinks

For healthy men and women, drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day reduces your risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury over a lifetime. Drinking no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion reduces the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion.

Source: www.alcohol.gov.au