

Medicines and driving

The Health Column

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During the silly season most people will consider their alcohol consumption and how it may affect their driving. However, many people don't realise that medicines can also affect driving.

We all know alcohol can slow our reflexes, but many medicines can do this too. If your driving skills are compromised by medicine side effects, you may cause an accident and risk death or injury to yourself or others. Other risks include fines, property damage, and loss of licence, or even time in jail.



Photo by K.Stokholm

Traffic accidents are a major cause of death and disability in Australia, particularly at this time of year. In 2013 there were 1,192 road deaths in Australia. Traffic accidents account for nearly two-thirds of all serious injury. The annual economic cost of traffic accidents in Australia is estimated at \$27 billion. Traffic accidents are devastating not only for victims, but society as a whole.

One study conducted in 2009 by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse found that 18% of fatally injured drivers tested positive for at least one illicit, prescription, or over-the-counter medicine. This had increased from 13% in 2005.

Many over-the-counter (OTC) medicines including antihistamines for allergy, and prescription medicines such as opioid pain relievers and benzodiazepines (for anxiety or sleep disorders) come with warnings against the operation of machinery – including motor vehicles – for a specified period of time after use. This is because these medicines can impair driving and make traffic accidents much more likely.

Drowsiness is just one side effect that can affect our driving skills. Some medicines can make us dizzy, light-headed or faint. They can cause us to be angry or aggressive (mood changes), or to feel sick or shaky. They may cause blurred or double vision and slow our reaction times.

Your local pharmacy is your health destination. Your pharmacist can provide advice on which medicines may affect your driving. When starting any new prescription or over-the-counter (OTC) medicine always check with your pharmacist about the possible side effects. If the side effects of your medicine do affect driving, ask your pharmacist if there is an alternative. For example, there are now antihistamines for allergy that are less sedating.

The New South Wales Centre for Road Safety makes the following suggestions:

- Look for and follow instructions on medicine warning labels.
- Ask your pharmacist or doctor to explain anything you do not understand about your medicine/s.
- Read the consumer medicines information (CMI) leaflet available for most prescription medicines.
- Arrange another form of transport – call a cab, ask a friend or relative for help, or use public transport.

For your own safety:

- Don't drive unless you are fit to do so.
- Don't stop taking your prescribed medicine if your driving is affected – cease driving and talk to your doctor or pharmacist about an alternative.
- Don't take more or less of the prescribed dose unless recommended by your doctor.
- Don't take another person's medicine.
- Don't consume alcohol with any medicine.
- Don't drive if you have missed a dose of medicine that controls symptoms which affect your driving.

For more detail, you can get an informative Fact Card titled *Medicines and driving* from pharmacies that provide the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's (PSA) Self Care health information.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone PSA on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.