

Staying safe through summer

Sadly, for many Australians, New Year is not always so happy. The “holidays” – which for most of us are times for celebration – full of fun and games, can all too quickly turn to disaster.

Sometimes comparatively simple incidents can result in a hospital visit. Fathers and grandfathers, demonstrating their expertise (in reality long gone) on newly acquired sports equipment – trampolines, surf boards and cricket bats – are more likely to demonstrate their incompetence.

Even the well trained, super fit, elite athletes have problems. Both the Australian and Sri Lankan cricket teams this year have been disadvantaged by injuries; so backyard cricketers need to be especially careful.

Of course, traffic accidents continue to be a major cause of death and disability in Australia and particularly at this time of year.

All road deaths are a tragic waste of life. That so many young drivers, passengers and pedestrians have died on Australian roads is a cause of both great sadness and concern in our communities.

With the need or desire to travel sometimes long distances comes the need to act carefully and responsibly on our roads.

The major causes of traffic accidents are all well documented – driving too fast, drink driving, and fatigue. Of these, probably the most difficult to control is driver fatigue. Certainly we can impose speed limits, provide random breath tests and legislate for the wearing of seat belts, but it's very hard to make laws to keep us awake.

Recent studies have confirmed that many Australians get insufficient sleep (seven and a half to eight hours each night is considered best for most people), and fatigue from sleep deprivation can be as problematic as driving under the influence of intoxication from alcohol or drugs.

There are also other factors which can contribute to feeling drowsy when driving; one which is often forgotten is prescription or non-prescription medicines.

Of course, we all know alcohol can slow our reflexes even when we don't actually feel tired. Many medicines can do this too; and taking certain medicines and drinking alcohol as well, even a small amount, can become a lethal cocktail.

When starting a new medicine, one prescribed by your doctor or one you buy without a prescription, always check with your pharmacist about the possible side effects; and ask especially if it's likely to cause drowsiness. If you take a medicine to aid sleep, drowsiness sufficient to affect your driving skills may occur the following day.

And 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; to feel sick, shaky or unsteady and to have blurred or double vision. All these effects can make it unsafe for us to drive, ride or even walk!

If your medicine does affect your driving, ask your pharmacist if there is an alternative. For instance, if you get hay fever there are now antihistamines and other medicines that won't make you feel drowsy.

There are also times when missing a dose of your prescribed medicine might cause problems. For example, if your medical condition such as epilepsy, anxiety or diabetes is not properly managed, a dangerous situation might result.

You can get more detailed information about the effects of medicines on driving, from pharmacies around Australia providing the Self Care health information. Ring 1300 369 772 or log onto the Pharmaceutical Society website at www.psa.org.au and click on “Self Care” then “Use the Self Care Pharmacy Finder” for the nearest location. Ask for the Self Care fact card titled *Medicines and Driving*. Maybe the card on *First Aid in the Home* could come in handy too.