



# Discussing Pot and Driving with Teenagers

## GUIDE FOR ADULTS

This discussion guide is part of the Pot and Driving campaign launched by the Canadian Public Health Association ([www.cpha.ca](http://www.cpha.ca)) on November 21, 2005 with funding from Canada's Drug Strategy, Health Canada<sup>1</sup>. It should be used in conjunction with the other campaign resources:

- Frequently Asked Questions (to inform the discussion)
- 10 Questions (a handout for teenagers to start the discussion)
- Responses to the 10 questions (handouts for teenagers to encourage talking and listening)
- Pot smoking pilots poster (to promote the campaign).

These resources are available on the campaign website, [www.potanddriving.cpha.ca](http://www.potanddriving.cpha.ca).

Let us know how and with whom you get the discussion going on pot and driving. We would be happy to share your experiences on our website for the benefit of others. Just e-mail us at [potanddriving@cpha.ca](mailto:potanddriving@cpha.ca).

Help us design the Pot and Driving logo! Focus group participants got this design "contest" going and made their suggestions. If you have ideas for a pot and driving logo that you'd like to share, please send them to [potanddriving@cpha.ca](mailto:potanddriving@cpha.ca) or by fax to 613-725-9826.

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Visit [www.potanddriving.cpha.ca](http://www.potanddriving.cpha.ca) to find out more about driving high.

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1. The views expressed herein do not necessarily express the views of Health Canada

## The evidence

Many young Canadians do not believe cannabis impairs their driving ability. The evidence indicates that cannabis can have specific effects, including:

- Slower reaction times that impair the driver's ability to respond to sudden events occurring outside the vehicle
- A reduced or 'drifting' attention span
- An altered perception of time and distance that affects a driver's ability to judge distances.

## The 10 Questions

There are widely held beliefs and a range of issues relating to cannabis use and driving that focus group participants consistently raised. These comments became the basis for the 10 questions featured here. Some questions take the point-of-view of a driver, others of a passenger. The responses to these questions suggest that we reconsider these widely held beliefs without judging individuals or groups who hold them. These responses are based on current research on impairment and accident risk.

When we talked to young Canadians in focus groups, we didn't express opinions about pot and driving. We were interested in learning what their attitudes and beliefs were, not in trying to influence those beliefs. Talking and listening is a very good place to start the discussion on pot and driving and using our 10 Questions is one way to do that.

Our 10 Questions are just an informal way of asking:

- Does pot have an effect on a person's driving behavior and on specific driving skills?
- If so, do these effects increase the chances that a driver will be involved in or cause a vehicle collision, either due to their own actions or the actions of other drivers? In other words, does pot increase what researchers refer to as 'crash risk'?
- If mixed with alcohol, does the crash risk increase?
- Are there other contributing factors—such as driver experience, past experience with the drug or difficult road conditions that make pot a source of risk for drivers?

## Common views on pot and driving

As with any open discussion, our focus group participants described a range of ideas, opinions and experiences. In our FAQ section, we address these and many other issues such as law enforcement.

The views we frequently heard in our focus groups were:

- Driving high is not a problem.
- I don't know anyone who was in an accident because of pot.
- Pot makes you more aware and focused on driving.
- You compensate for the effects of the pot on your driving by slowing down.
- If you are stopped by police and they suspect you are high and impaired, they have no way to prove it.
- They're legalizing pot so it can't be all that dangerous to drive high.
- Passengers don't feel at risk if they think you're a good driver.
- Driving drunk isn't a good idea because it's dangerous and you can get charged and lose your license.
- When you're high, you're more afraid of other drivers than how it affects your own driving.
- Pot doesn't cause accidents, drivers do.

## Approach and response

Our research tells us the approach needs to be straightforward and reasonable, and to avoid moral undertones. Since the issue of cannabis and driving is new from a public education and awareness perspective, we decided that a favourable response from young people to this information about cannabis impairment would be "Yeah, they might have a point."

## Confidentiality, consent and disclosure

Before starting the discussion on pot and driving, you should first consider issues around confidentiality, consent, disclosure and support. Samples of forms we used in our focus groups are appended for your consideration.

# The 10 Questions and why we asked them

## 1. Into it

*If you were a passenger in a commercial jet, would you be comfortable if your pilots smoked up so they could really get into flying the plane?*

You might think smoking pot helps you drive better because you're more focused. When you're into something, like watching a movie or playing a video game, you can forget where you are.

But when you're really aware of some things, you are less aware of others — it's the law of attention. You may not notice other things until it's too late.

### Why did we ask this question?

Several young participants in our focus groups spoke about how pot helps them focus. This correlates with the widely held view that pot doesn't reduce driving ability, but actually increases it. Research shows that drivers can over focus while driving and that this makes them more vulnerable to unexpected events. When you're driving high, you might not notice other things until it's too late. Regardless of their position on pot and driving, participants indicated they would not be happy if they were passengers in a plane if their pilots got 'into it' by smoking pot before takeoff.

### Discussion points

- Suppose you and your friends were on a plane and you noticed the pilot and co-pilot smoking pot:
  - How would you convince your pilot not to take a drag from the joint?
  - Could the pilot assure you that he isn't putting you or your friends at risk? If so, what would he say?

## 2. Play

*If driving high is like playing a video game, what happens when you make a wrong move?*

In the game world you can learn as much by making wrong moves as you can by making right ones. In the end you'll become a better player.

When you take control of a real vehicle you can't go back to the last save point if you make a wrong move. Driving high may feel like playing a video game but it isn't.

### **Why did we ask this question?**

Many young people associate driving high with playing a video game because they think that with either activity, pot increases their ability. Video games simulating motor vehicle crashes are especially appealing to young male Canadians. Video games are popular in part because they allow users to take risks and learn from them. While using pot may improve your score in a video game (and the evidence is not clear on this), the consequences of making a mistake are minimal. So playing a video game while smoking pot and driving a motor vehicle while smoking pot do not have comparable risks.

### **Discussion points**

- What are your favorite video games and why do you enjoy them?
- Do you think people experience gaming differently when they're high?
- If you make a mistake in a game, what is your reaction?
- How might your reaction be different if you happened to be driving high?

### 3. React

*If driving high slows down your reaction time, what will happen if a car suddenly swerves into your lane?*

Sometimes when you're driving you have to react quickly to something you don't expect. Your reaction time is the time it takes to see the problem, figure out what to do, and do it.

Smoking pot slows down your reaction time. If you drive high, your slower reaction might make a big difference when it counts.

#### **Why did we ask this question?**

Focus group participants generally believed that pot increases reaction times, although the effect of this increase was not seen to be that important. In fact, pot has been found to slow down a person's reaction time and to affect the driver's ability to judge distances. Also, new drivers have slower reaction time and reaction time can decrease during difficult driving conditions.

#### **Discussion points**

- Have you ever been in a situation where you or your driver had to react quickly to something unexpected while you were driving? If so, what was your experience?

#### 4. Drift

*If your mind drifts when you drive high, will you be prepared for something that needs your full attention?*

The reason why your mind drifts when you're high is because pot disturbs your short-term memory. Losing your train-of-thought may not be that important if you're sitting on a park bench with friends, but it can be dangerous when you're behind the wheel.

If you decide to drive high and your mind drifts, you may not be paying attention when you really need to be.

##### **Why did we ask this question?**

After you've been driving for a while, the knowledge and skills you use behind the wheel become part of your long-term memory. You get used to driving and it feels like you're doing it without thinking. But you still need to be alert to what's going on around you when you're driving. Focus group participants indicated that when they're high their mind drifts more. This is opposite to being overly focused on the task of driving. Both too much and too little focus can be dangerous. This lack of focus can be further exaggerated by conditions such as fatigue.

##### **Discussion points**

- When a person is high after smoking pot, what are the effects of the drug?
- Do you think the effect pot has on the mind and the body can have an effect on driving?

## 5. Compensate

*Will you always be able to compensate when you drive high?*

When you drive high you try to make up for the effects of pot in different ways, like slowing down or staying in one lane. In other words you compensate.

You never know what will happen when you're driving. Will compensating for the effects of pot be enough?

### **Why did we ask this question?**

When you're driving high, it's harder to judge distances and your mind can drift. It may be harder to pay attention to your surroundings. One of the most common perceptions is that pot users can compensate for being high at the wheel. Researchers, who in experimental tests have observed the tendency of drivers to compensate when they're high, note that everyone has limited 'driving resources' and that driving impaired, which literally means driving with 'reduced ability', can make the difference if the driving gets more demanding.

### **Discussion points**

- Do you think someone can compensate for being drunk behind the wheel?  
Why? Why not?
- Do you think someone can compensate for being high behind the wheel?  
Why? Why not?

## 6. Strength

*How strong is your pot this time?*

Some think pot is a lot stronger than it used to be. It's hard to prove because pot isn't regulated like alcohol or prescription drugs.

Pot strength can vary depending on where it comes from, how it was grown, and what strain it is. The strength of the pot can make a big difference on your driving, especially if you only use it occasionally.

### **Why did we ask this question?**

The relationship between pot dose and risk is not entirely straightforward. As is the case with alcohol, risk increases with dose. The same dose of pot, however, can have less of an effect with a more regular user than an infrequent one. Also, pot's THC concentrations (the compound that gives pot its high) can vary significantly from batch to batch and even the natural variation can be enough to warrant caution, especially if a person is not familiar with pot and its effects.

### **Discussion points**

- Do people who smoke the same amount of pot seem to have the same high? If no, how do the highs seem to differ?

## 7. Mixing

*If you mix pot and alcohol, what do you get?*

When you use alcohol and pot together the effect is different than when you use them separately. It is called synergy and the results are unpredictable.

Mixing pot and alcohol can have a big effect on your driving and it can put you and your passengers at serious risk.

### **Why did we ask this question?**

Mixing pot with other drugs, and with alcohol in particular, is one of the most serious concerns relating to pot use and driving. We didn't focus our campaign on this because we wanted to raise awareness about pot's effects independent of alcohol.

### **Discussion points**

- How would you compare drinking alcohol, smoking pot, with drinking and smoking together?
- What does synergy mean?

## 8. Off-road

*Is it safe to drive high off-road?*

Canada's a big country with lots of off-road trails. Maybe you ride an ATV, a dirt bike or a snowmobile on them. In every season, off-road driving has unique challenges.

If you get high and hit the trails, you may not be able to meet the challenges when you really need to.

### **Why did we ask this question?**

Off-road driving has unique challenges. In summer, fallen branches, rocks or uneven ground might cause problems for you as a driver. In winter, you may have to deal with dangerous snow or ice conditions on trails that run over rivers, lakes or sea-ice. Across Canada and especially in the North, warmer seasonal temperatures are bringing thinner ice, later freeze-ups and earlier break-ups.

Not much is known about pot use and off-road driving. However, the driving age for off-road vehicles is younger than for on-road in many provinces. Also, alcohol is known to play a very significant role in off-road accidents, and law enforcement is minimal off-road. Whether on road or off, driving high puts you at risk.

### **Discussion points**

- What are some of the things you can do off-road that you cannot do on road?
- Why do you think there are so many off-road accidents?

## 9. Freedom

*If you think your driver is high, can you choose not to get in?*

Having a friend with a car can make a big difference in your life. It gives you the freedom to go to more places and do more things.

If you choose not to get into a vehicle because you think your driver is high, you have the right to make that decision. You have the freedom to choose.

### **Why did we ask this question?**

Young passengers know they can refuse to get into a car with a driver who has been drinking because alcohol-impaired driving is now socially unacceptable. The same is not true for pot. Pot is associated with freedom. This is especially true with young people who are moving out into the world and gaining new experiences along the way. We want our audience to consider other applications of 'freedom of choice' that are important for young people, including the freedom to decide not to do something they think is risky and to look for other options.

This is good opportunity to discuss how to plan for other transportation if your driver is high.

### **Discussion points**

- Do you feel free to refuse a drive with someone who is high?
- How can you plan for this before you leave home?

## 10. Friendship

*If your friends drive high, do you have to?*

Friends often share interests, opinions and pastimes. That's usually why they're friends. So what happens if your friends drive high and you don't want to?

If you decide not to drive high your friends might follow your example. They might not. Either way, you can still be friends.

### **Why did we ask this question?**

Most drug use occurs in the context of friends and peer groups. In communities where there is an absence of public transportation, there can be a lot of pressure to drive high or to drive with someone who is high. Peers and friends influence one another in complex ways. This question gives young people the opportunity to raise some of these concerns, with their friends and perhaps with their parents.

### **Discussion points**

- Do you think it is difficult to disagree with your friends? If yes, then why?
- Can you suggest some ways you can do this and still be friends?

**ADDENDUM**  
**Pot and Driving: A Public Awareness Campaign**

**SAMPLE CONSENT FORM**

I understand that I am taking part in a Pot and Driving discussion group. There is no harm or risk to myself in doing this. I am free to withdraw at any time. All information given by me will remain private. My name will not be used or revealed in any way without my consent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date: day/month/year

# POT AND DRIVING

## A PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

### THE DISCUSSION

Here you put what you plan to do.

### Consent Form

- I have read the information letter and I agree to let my child participate in the discussion about pot and driving.
- My child may refuse to answer certain questions and may decide to stop participating in the discussion at any time.

I allow my child to participate in the discussion on pot and driving.

*(please print your child's name)* \_\_\_\_\_

I **do not** allow my child to participate in the discussion on pot and driving

*(please print your child's name)* \_\_\_\_\_

Please provide your name and signature below:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Parent/Guardian      Signature of Parent/Guardian      Date  
(Please Print)