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Program Expansion to Address Increase of Impaired Driving During Global COVID-19 Pandemic

Educational classes and resources offered to adults and adolescents to keep our roadways safe

Researchers at University of California San Diego School of Medicine will expand a statewide program to prevent driving under the influence of alcohol, cannabis and prescription drugs. With funding from the California Office of Traffic Safety through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the UC San Diego Training, Research and Education for Driving Safety Program (TREDS) provides education and resources to teach the public about the dangers of driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs in an effort to keep our roadways safe.

In addition to alcohol, driving under the influence of cannabis and certain prescription or over-the-counter medications has rapidly become a serious traffic safety issue in the United States, especially during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

An NHTSA study conducted at five hospital trauma centers between March and July of 2020 found that nearly two-thirds of seriously or fatally injured road users tested positive for at least one active drug, including alcohol, cannabis or opioids. The number of drivers that tested positive for opioids or cannabis dramatically increased after mid-March compared to the previous six months.

“Stress, anxiety and depression are serious mental health concerns during the pandemic, and some are turning to alcohol, drugs and opioids to manage their emotions and



Linda Hill, MD, MPH, program director of TREDS and professor of family medicine at University of California San Diego Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health and Human Longevity.

then getting behind the wheel,” said Linda Hill, MD, MPH, program director of TREDIS and professor of family medicine at University of California San Diego Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health and Human Longevity. “Collisions due to driving under the influence are 100 percent preventable. Our behavior profoundly influences our crash risk. We can reduce this risk by providing intervention strategies.”

TREDIS develops traffic safety education programs and conducts “train-the-trainer” workshops to prepare law enforcement and health professionals to teach classes to the public. The focus of this year’s program includes the following:

- Delivering virtual workshops on a monthly basis with the goal of training professionals in every county in California. “This is a major expansion from previous years,” said Hill. “The workshops will feature curricula that address the topics of distracted driving, pedestrian safety, older road user safety and driving under the influence of alcohol, cannabis and medications.”
- Linking organizations, groups and educational institutions with professionals in their communities who have received training to deliver these prevention programs.

Experts like Hill remind the public that the potency of today’s cannabis has increased dramatically in recent years and affects each person differently. The peak effect for smoking THC is approximately 10 minutes after inhaling and can last four to eight hours. For edibles, the peak effect may occur up to two hours after ingesting and may last 10 hours or longer.

“Impairing effects are based on the strength of THC, personal tolerance and mode of use,” said Hill. “It is critical that we continue to collaborate with those on the frontlines of road safety and the health professionals who see the tragic results of impaired driving in our emergency room settings, so we can have a unified message to our community to drive safely and sober, alcohol and drug free.”

For more information, to request a training or locate a class instructor, contact TREDIS at 858-534-8386 or treds@ucsd.edu.

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