

CANNABIS – CAN IT MAKE YOU A BETTER DRIVER?

One Computer Games Company Is Arguing That Cannabis, Taken In Small Quantities, Actually Improves Your Driving. Not Surprisingly Perhaps, the RAC Disagree...



While no responsible person would ever advocate the use of drugs for drivers, tests using a recently developed video game called 'Burnout' have thrown up some surprise statistics.

The testers found that a moderate amount of cannabis actually improved driving performance amongst those they studied. Results from another recent study apparently also show that people drive both faster and safer whilst under the influence of the drug.

A group of twenty drivers aged 21-40 were recruited for the 'Burnout' study, all of whom had not previously owned a video games machine or described themselves as players of video games. Ten of them smoked approximately 0.15 milligrams of cannabis, equivalent to about a half a 'joint'. The other 10 declared they had not had any stimulant for at least 72 hours before the test. They were then given a thorough demonstration of Burnout and were subsequently asked to take the controls and play the video game themselves.

Participants' skills at different elements of the game - reaction times, speed, concentration levels and road safety - were thoroughly analysed and evaluated. The results showed that for those who had smoked 0.15 mgs of cannabis:

- 80% demonstrated superior reaction times

- 60% finished a lap faster

- 70% experienced a lower number of collisions

- 60% reached a higher level in the game

The cannabis takers were then pitched against the non-cannabis takers in a head-to-head challenge on Burnout. In this competitive setting, the cannabis takers came out on top in 8 out of 10 of the match-ups. The drivers under the influence of cannabis appeared to have more confidence in their ability and be much calmer: Burnout is said to be 'a fast paced and adrenalin-stoked' game and the cannabis could have helped keep them in control of their nerves.

For the second stage of the experiment, the group who had already smoked cannabis smoked some more, increasing their total intake to 0.58 milligrams, equating to approximately two "joints". The driving performance on Burnout then showed a significant decrease. With a total of 0.58 milligrams of cannabis in the system:

- 60% demonstrated superior reaction times

- 30% finished the game faster

- 40% experienced a lower number of collisions

- 20% reached a higher level in the game

In the second part of the head-to-head challenges, the cannabis smokers won only three races against their non-cannabis smoking counterparts: a clear indicator of worsening driving performance.

Simon Smith-Wright, Burnout's Communications Director, said: "The results of our tests clearly indicate that a small or moderate amount of cannabis is actually quite beneficial to someone's driving performance. Further amounts then tend to start to impinge on performance, although interestingly reaction times appear to best withstand the increased amount of the drug in the system. Obviously Burnout is a video game, and whilst extremely realistic, we cannot claim that these findings translate to real life driving, nor are we encouraging anyone to try out the theory."

Put findings like these in front of motoring bodies like the RAC however and you get a terse response. The RAC's position is already that relaxing the law on the possession of cannabis could lead to more people taking the drug and driving. The organization takes for granted the fact that, in every circumstance, the drug is detrimental to anyone at the wheel.

Previous RAC Foundation research has uncovered that:

Some estimates suggest that at least 1.5 million people in the UK regularly smoke cannabis. A substantial number choose to drive after taking it despite research showing that the drug severely impairs driver judgement.

Almost 20 per cent of road accident fatalities have traces of drugs in their systems.

Young drivers are twice as likely to have been driven by someone high on drugs rather than over the drink limit.

More than 90 per cent of motorists are in favour of the police having powers to carry out roadside testing for illegal drugs and 93 per cent would support a Government funded educational campaign.

Recreational Drugs and Driving, a study produced for the Scottish Executive, revealed that cannabis was the most commonly used substance among young drug takers - most of whom believed that it had little or no effect on their driving abilities.

Seventy per cent of people believe that a traffic light system of marking on the packaging of legal drugs would be useful.

More than a quarter of the 1000 respondents to a recent survey, organised by a motoring magazine (Max Power), admitted that they take illicit drugs and drive every week. 36 per cent said that they drug drive at least once a month and only six per cent of drivers, who admitted regularly taking drugs and driving, thought their driving suffered as a result - 18 per cent actually felt that drugs improved it. The most common drug taken before getting behind the wheel was cannabis.

Typical comments by drivers responding to the survey were: 'After a smoke you are more relaxed and your reactions are quicker', while others commented that you were more relaxed and composed after smoking cannabis and didn't find driving so daunting.

More recently, drivers have been plied with triple vodka and tonics and specially imported cannabis spliffs before going behind the wheel at the request of the Government. The results of this drink/drug binge are contained in a recent report prepared for the Department for Transport by TRL. The 20 dope participants were all males aged over 18 who were regular cannabis and alcohol users. The participants were recruited through people who were known to the project team and known to be regular cannabis users.

The 'grass'-based cigarettes were supplied by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). The strength of the 'blow' was below that which one can normally score on the high street. The vodka and tonics were administered 5 minutes before smoking the cannabis. The Home Office gave a license for the University of Birmingham to import the dope and then transfer it to TRL where it was registered in the drugs control book. Even though NIDA recommend a 7 second draw on the spliff, this was reduced to 3 seconds to minimise any discomfort

experienced by the participants.

The research was conducted to ascertain the effects of mixing relatively low doses of cannabis and alcohol on driving. The alcohol amounted to a blood alcohol concentration of 50mg of alcohol per 100ml of blood (80mg is the legal limit).

The main findings include :

- Respondents were aware of their impairment and tried to compensate by driving more slowly
- Cannabis adversely affected their performance of staying in lane on a bend
- The effects of cannabis and alcohol together were greater than with cannabis alone
- There was no evidence that either alcohol or cannabis offset the effect of the other
- The tracking performance deteriorated with increasing dose level
- The participants' eye/hand co-ordination was impaired more with cannabis and alcohol than with cannabis or alcohol alone
- On the figure of 8, drive participants were more 'wobbly' with cannabis
- Cannabis affected tasks more which required continuous attention
- Simple reaction times are only affected at relatively high blood alcohol levels
- The standard impairment testing applied by police surgeons were generally effective in determining impairment