

Newbury Group of Advanced Motorists

Advanced Driving Articles

3 – Are You Safe to Drive?

by David Skinner, Institute of Advanced Motorists, Newbury Group

Many drivers check their car (well, occasionally, anyway), especially before a long journey. But how many of us actually check ourselves – actively consider whether we are fit to drive?

Most people will not attempt to drive if they have been drinking alcohol, if only because the penalty for getting caught is so high. But there are other physical conditions that make driving inadvisable. A recent report estimates that almost a quarter (22%) of people killed in road traffic collisions (RTCs) have illegal drugs in their bloodstream, and that there is an increasing number of RTCs where the presence of drugs in a driver's body may have been a contributory factor to the cause of the crash.

Prescription medication can have similar effects. Antihistamines (often used in flu and hay fever remedies) and tranquillisers (used to treat anxiety, depression and sleeping disorders) may significantly affect reaction times and cause drowsiness. If the label advises against 'operating heavy machinery', consider it a warning not to get behind the wheel of a vehicle. If in doubt, consult your doctor.

However, even if you are drug-free, other factors can affect you, physically and mentally, enough to make driving inadvisable. The most obvious condition is tiredness. Another survey found that around 20% of the accidents that occur on motorways happen as a direct result of motorists falling asleep at the wheel. They are usually identified by the driver running off the road, or smashing into the back of another vehicle, at high speed. Typically, the highest risk group for sleep-related vehicle accidents is young men, mostly under 30 years old, who are likely to crash after little or no sleep and tend to be involved in early-morning accidents. Older men tend to be at risk during the mid-afternoon, when they begin to become drowsy and start to suffer from low blood sugar.

Or you might be in a heightened emotional state – angry, upset or preoccupied with work or personal matters – which is likely to lower your ability to concentrate on driving and make you less aware of your surroundings.

Advanced drivers consider their physical and mental state before every drive; if there is any doubt that they are safe they will postpone the journey, use public transport or ask someone else to drive.

If you want to know more, visit the Newbury Group of Advanced Motorists website at www.niam.org.uk, or contact the Group Secretary, Dick Bird, by e-mail on secretary@niam.org.uk or by telephone on 01488 608242.