Don’t drink and drive. But what about your friend, the DD?

By ACSH Staff — June 10, 2013

A recent study on drunk driving is giving the term DD -- as in Designated Driver-- a whole new meaning. Turns out, that sober friend you trust to take you home safely may not be stone cold sober either.

Researchers from the University of Florida found that two out of five designated drivers drink alcohol before getting behind the wheel, enough of it to show a blood alcohol content (BAC) of .05 percent a percentage that has recently been up for review as suggested by the National Highway Transportation Safety Board to be the new legal BAC limit, reduced from the current .08 percent.

The study included more than 1,000 bar patrons observed leaving drinking establishments throughout the college town of Gainesville, Fla. Researchers asked whether those individuals had been declared the designated driver (DD) and if so, they were asked to volunteer to take a breathalyzer test before leaving. A total of 165 designated drivers were studied, and of those, 35 percent had had at least one drink before getting behind the wheel and half of them registered BAC levels above .05 percent.

Though still under the legal limit, researchers maintain that numerous studies have shown significant alcohol-related impairment at a BAC level of .05 percent. Considering the low BAC levels at which driving-related abilities are negatively affected, these findings identify the need for consensus across researcher, layperson, and communication campaigns that a designated driver must be someone who abstains from drinking entirely, the team wrote.

ACSH’s associate director of public health Ariel Savransky notes, Given that nearly one-third of all traffic-related deaths in the United States involve alcohol-impaired drivers, it is imperative that designated drivers actually do the job they say they’re going to do: drive sober, not impaired. In terms of public health, it’s really important that we find ways to make sure that people are not driving while under the influence. The ultimate answer may be not to rely on designated drivers, but rather take a cab if you suspect that your designated driver may have been drinking.

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