

## DWI

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### DWI: may mean more.

Everybody knows what "DWI" stands for. We have had plenty of horror stories lately about drunk drivers and the havoc that they've caused on the roadways. Most of us personally know someone who has either died as a victim of a drunk driver, or at least know a family that has been affected by such a tragedy. But did you know that the "I" in DWI actually can apply to not just alcohol, but to any chemical substance that is capable of causing intoxication, or more correctly, impairment. The definition of impairment is simple: it's when a person is no longer capable of safely operating a vehicle. There are probably hundreds of substances that are capable of impairment, many of which are readily available, either at your local bar or liquor store, or on the street, or at the drug store, or yes, even at the doctor's office. These substances may come in various shapes, sizes, and forms and for various prices. You can smoke them, sniff them, shoot them up, or swallow them. But the danger is the same regardless of the route administered or where you got them: you or someone else could be seriously hurt or die as a result of driving while impaired by these substances. The risk of using some of these chemicals is obvious. Alcohol, opiate narcotics, marijuana, hallucinogens, sedatives and amphetamines are "no-brainers," (no pun intended.) But did you know that tranquilizers, antidepressants, muscle relaxants, certain heart and blood pressure medications, cough medicines, cold pills and even antihistamines are also capable of causing impairment? Over-the-counter antihistamines are particularly innocent drugs that can cause surprisingly significant impairment. A recent study compared the effects of three alcohol drinks with a standard dose of an antihistamine. Researchers found that reflex times and subject perception of impairment were essentially equal, and both resulted in significant impairment. In other words, many of the older antihistamines can be just as dangerous as alcohol if one drives under their influence. A newer antihistamine studied (still only available by prescription) did not cause significant impairment. Even potentially worse can be combinations of these substances. For example, a small amount of alcohol when combined with certain prescription drugs, especially sedatives, narcotic pain pills and antihistamines, can result in much more severe impairment than either substance alone. Don't think that law enforcement agencies aren't aware of these facts. There are special officers in the Washington State Patrol and many other law enforcement agencies around the state who are highly trained to not only to determine whether a driver is impaired, but also what substance has impaired him or her. And the courts can and do convict impaired drivers based on evidence these officers submit. But I'm sure these officers would rather talk about safety and prevention than arrest and conviction. We all want to see our roads become safer places to drive. The next time you buy over-the counter medication, or have a prescription filled, ask the doctor or pharmacist if the medication will cause any impairment to safe driving, or if combining it with alcohol is dangerous. And if the answer is yes, plan to find a designated driver, or stay home. It only takes one little mistake to cause a big tragedy.