

IS THE LEGAL LIMIT YOUR LIMIT?

Thousands of lives are lost every year on our roads. Various strategies, such as the Road to Safety Strategy, try to enhance safe driving through campaigns such as Arrive Alive. Motorists are well aware of the slogans of "Speed Kills!", "Buckle up!", "Stay Alert Stay Alive!" etc.

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One of the most important slogans to remember over the festive season is however "Don't drink and drive!" Many fatalities are caused by drunk drivers losing control of their vehicles. In recent times drunk driving has become a highly debated topic and questions raised included "Should alcohol advertising be banned?" and "How much is too much?"

It is important that more attention be given to the question by motorists on "How much is too much?" This question refers to the quantity of liquor that may be consumed before the driver finds himself in trouble.

The Road Traffic Act, 1989, creates two separate offences which involve the use of alcohol. It is an offence to drive a vehicle on a public road or occupy the driver's seat of a motor vehicle with its engine running while the person behind the wheel:

- Is under the influence of intoxicating liquor, or a drug having a narcotic effect; or
- Has a concentration of alcohol in the blood of 0,05g or more per 100ml of blood.

The practical implication is that a blood alcohol concentration of less than 0,05g per 100ml blood provides no guarantee that one can drive a vehicle with the necessary skill, nor does it provide immunity against prosecution; with adequate proof one can be found guilty on the main charge, namely "drunken driving". Any person behind the wheel whose blood-alcohol level is 0,05g or more per 100ml is regarded by the law as being incapable of driving a vehicle, and is liable to be prosecuted. Medical doctors have used formulas such as the Widmark formula to determine how many drinks would push the alcohol level of the average person beyond the 0.05g per 100ml mark. The uptake of alcohol is however influenced by many other factors such as volume, strength, type of dilutant

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(eg Coke), type of meal, medication, previous operations, temperature of drink, water content of organs, diffusion gradient, rate of blood flow, any disease etc. The effects vary from person to person and no set pattern of behavior does exist.

As a general rule it has been indicated in the past that if the motorist consumes more than 2 alcoholic drinks he might be prosecuted for "driving under the influence". This "general rule" is however a very dangerous assumption.

The correct question should rather be "How much can I drink before my ability to drive is affected?" Alcohol is regarded as a depressant of the central nervous system and will have a negative effect on important aspects such as concentration, muscular movement, vision, the ability to react to dangerous situations etc. Alcohol is a contributing factor to many accidents and even though the slightly intoxicated driver might adjust his driving by driving slower, he would not be able to react as sharp and timely in the case of an emergency brought about by other drivers or circumstances. The consumption of ANY alcohol might thus affect the ability to drive safely and should be avoided by all drivers!

Motorists who have consumed alcohol are advised to :

- Travel by taxi or public transport;
- Allow a non-drinking friend or relative to drive them home; or
- Sleep where they are and drive home the next day.

It is important that we, over the upcoming festive season, adhere to the slogan "Don't drink and Drive!" and understand why it is not "Don't drink too much and drive!"

(Article compiled by Adv J Jonck, the developer of the web site www.arrivealive.co.za. This web site is a private sector effort to enhance awareness on road safety and has been developed with the kind support of Volkswagen, Digicore, Clear Vision Optometrists and Chillies Internet Strategists.)



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