

DRIVING UNDER THE *influence*

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Lindsay Lohan, Eve and Paris Hilton are but a few of the boozy women who've hit the headlines for Driving Under the Influence

(DUI). Historically, society has been more tolerant of drunkenness in men than in women, and, according to a recent report published on behalf of the US Medical Council on Alcohol, that is why considerable media attention has been given to female celebrities arrested for DUI. But, says the report, media coverage has constructed the image of women who drink as glamorous, sophisticated and professional, neglecting to take into account the potentially life-changing consequences of drink driving.

Rita*, a producer from Cape Town, left her office late one evening after enjoying drinks with colleagues. 'I can't remember how many glasses I had,' says Rita, 'but I didn't consider myself drunk.' On her way home, Rita encountered a police roadblock. 'The officer asked me if I'd been drinking and I saw no reason not to tell the truth – I'd had a couple of glasses of wine.'

'I felt fine to drive'

While Rita might not have thought she was drunk, she had, in fact, drunk

The party season is here, and many of us will be enjoying a few drinks. But even if you've limited your alcohol intake, is it ever fine to get behind the wheel? Here's a guide to having a good time – safely.

remember:

- **Black coffee** and a cold shower won't sober you up – there's no way to increase the rate at which the body eliminates alcohol.
- **Eating a meal** cannot prevent intoxication, but slow-digesting foods, like rich carbohydrates and proteins, will reduce the amount of alcohol absorbed directly into the bloodstream through the mucous lining of the stomach and slow down the rate at which it's emptied into the small intestine.
- **Alcohol** will enhance the effect of prescription medications that make you drowsy.
- **If a friend passes out** from drinking, monitor her breathing and heart rate and seek medical help – the amount of alcohol it takes to pass out is dangerously close to the amount it takes to kill.

enough not only to put her over the legal limit, but to significantly impair her ability to drive.

The statistics on alcohol-related Road Traffic Accidents (RTAs) are sobering. The Human Sciences Research Council reports that 'human error' – including alcohol use – causes 80–90% of all RTAs. 'As blood alcohol concentration rises, memory, fine discrimination and concentration functions diminish and vision and coordination functions become rapidly impaired,' says Dr Leon Wagner, a medico-legal consultant and advisor to ArriveAlive.co.za.

When the officer asked Rita to take a breathalyser test, she was unconcerned – until her reading registered over the legal limit. 'Alcohol is volatile enough to appear in the expired breath,' explains Wagner. 'Very little of it is absorbed through the mucous lining of the mouth and stomach, most of it being absorbed

FACT
9 000
 people are
 killed and
75 000
 injured in
 alcohol-related
 road traffic
 accidents in
 South Africa
 each year.



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through the walls of the small intestine. From here, it enters the bloodstream and is carried to various organs, including the brain and lungs. Lung tissue is very thin, with blood in the fine capillaries, or alveoli, and air virtually in contact, facilitating the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide (breathing). If blood contains alcohol, some of it will be lost into the alveolar air. This is how alcohol gets into the breath – the amount of alcohol getting into the air of the lungs is proportional to the amount of alcohol in the blood.'

'I was arrested on the spot!'

Rita was arrested and taken to the local police station. The only woman among many men, she felt 'distinctly uncomfortable'. After being booked and photographed, Rita says she was thrown into a cold, dark cell.

Some time later, a nurse arrived to take a blood sample. 'Her attitude left me feeling indignant, and I protested,' says Rita. But **Section 37** of the Criminal Law and Procedure Act makes provision for the sampling of blood without the consent of the alleged perpetrator and allows for the use of necessary restraint or force to obtain it, says Wagner. 'Refusing a blood sample to be drawn, shifts the onus onto the accused to prove they are under the legal limit – in practice, it's as good as admitting guilt,' he explains. A law enforcement officer must give a written order to a doctor or nurse to take the sample and to examine the alleged perpetrator to determine her sobriety. The blood sample is sent to a laboratory and Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) at the time of arrest is calculated.

Because her blood test was to be used as evidence in court, Rita was able to apply for bail, but she had to sober up before she could be released. If she hadn't been able to afford bail, she



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would have had to stay locked up until her case was heard. As the night wore on, says Rita, her cell began to fill up with 'scary characters', some having been involved in violent crime. After being charged with driving under the influence and spending eight hours in jail, Rita was released, much to her relief. 'Spending the night banged up in a cell is definitely not to be repeated. Ever.'

More than a bad hangover...

According to the Road Traffic Act of 1996, it's an offence to drive a vehicle on a public road, or even to sit in the driver's seat of a vehicle which has its engine running, while:

- Under the influence of an intoxicating liquor or a drug with narcotic effect
- Your blood alcohol concentration is not less than 0,05g per 100ml of blood
- The concentration of alcohol in your breath is not less than 0,24mg per 1000ml.

If convicted of DUI, you may be fined or imprisoned – or both – and will have

a criminal record. Your driver's licence may be endorsed with details of your conviction, suspended or even cancelled. Killing another road-user could lead to a manslaughter conviction.

Alternative sentencing

Rita's court case lasted several months. When her blood test confirmed she was over the limit, she pleaded guilty and received a suspended sentence, provided that she complete 100 hours of community service under the supervision of a social worker. She also had to attend individual counselling sessions. A first-time offender, Rita was lucky: the court in which she was prosecuted is part of the National Institute for Crime Prevention and the Reintegration of Offenders (NICRO) Alternative Sentencing Programme, which facilitates individually tailored programmes designed to bring about behavioural change. The programme helped Rita develop a sense of accountability and responsibility for her actions.

The more you drink, the less you think...

The higher the concentration of alcohol in the blood, the greater its effect, says Dr Wagner. 'Although alcohol is a Central Nervous System depressant, its early effects can lead to a false sense of "stimulation", which can lead a person to act or perform in ways they wouldn't normally. So self-restraint and inhibition are the first casualties.'

How much can I drink and still drive?

Alcohol affects different people differently, so it's difficult to determine how much alcohol it takes to be over the limit. Age, sex, physical activity and fitness all have an effect on the water content of the body, which determines the distribution of alcohol, which is water soluble. This is known

CUT OUT AND KEEP IN YOUR PURSE!

- **JHB:** Cabs for Women – 0861 777 778
- **DBN:** Mozzies Cabs – 0860 669 943
- **CT:** Rikkis Cabs – 0861 745 547
- **National:** Good Fellas – (JHB, PTA, CT, PE, EL, DBN) 0861 433 552

as the 'r' Factor and is used in the Widmark formula to calculate BAC. Women typically have higher body fat, and hence a lower 'r' Factor, than men – which is why we get drunk more easily. Experiments have shown that drinking just two beers puts both men and women over the legal limit. Dr Wagner points out that alcohol levels as low as 0,04 g/dl considerably impair reaction time and hence our ability to avoid dangerous situations. Better safe than sorry – if you're driving, don't drink, and if you're drinking, nominate a designated driver or hail a cab.

- **JHB:** Cabs for Women is SA's only cab service owned and driven by women, for women only. 0861 777 778.
- **DBN:** Mozzies Cabs – 0860 669 943
- **CT:** Rikkis Cabs – 0861 745 547

If you become a member of Good Fellas, which operates in Jo'burg, Pretoria, Cape Town, Durban, PE and East London, they will drive you home in your own car. Contact their Call Centre on 0861 433 552.

On the frontline of the war

'Dealing with traumas resulting from alcohol-related RTAs means I have little sympathy for those who choose to drink and drive – they should see the tragic results,' says Dr Dave Barnes, trauma surgeon and vice president/director of communications of the South African Medical Society (www.saml.co.za). 'Even scarier is the growing trend to drive under the influence of alcohol and other substances, like cocaine. We need to re-examine our values, especially the manner in which our actions can impact on the lives of our fellow human beings. Think before you drink and drive – arrange for a sober, focused driver to deliver you safely home.' ❖

* Name has been changed.

Need help?

Alcoholics Anonymous: www.aanonymous.co.za