

[back to article](#)

**TIMES**DAILY.COM

# For law enforcement, drugs harder to detect than booze

By [Lisa Singleton-Rickman](#) & [Tom Smith](#)  
Of the TimesDaily

Published: Wednesday, November 17, 2010 at 3:30 a.m.

There are a couple of reasons Alabama law enforcement agencies don't have the most up-to-date technology when it comes to detecting drivers under the influence of drugs: costs and controversy in the courts.

With prescription drug abuse a growing problem in the state and nation, it's no surprise police are seeing a result on roadways.

Because there is no national equivalent of the blood alcohol content test to measure the level of drug impairment on site, agencies are forced to use other, slower tests before charging individuals with the crime of drug-related DUI.

"We're getting pounded by painkillers," said Cpl. Chad Blankinchip, an instructor at the Alabama Criminal Justice Training Center in Selma. "Marijuana is still the most common because people think it's undetectable, but painkillers are right up there with it."

Special equipment is available to determine drug use while driving. With only a couple of machines in the state, they are controversial and still not widely used.

The machine processes saliva samples, and even though results have a high accuracy rate, Alabama courts rarely accept the findings, preferring test results of blood or urine samples.

But they're also expensive and it's not an investment that law enforcement departments are willing to make — at least not now while the technology is so



*Daniel Giles/TimesDaily photo illustration*  
Law enforcement officials have seen an increase in driving under the influence cases involving drugs, especially prescription medication. Drugs are harder to detect than alcohol and usually mean more intensive testing.

new.

But there is an upside in the battle against drugged drivers: Alabama is one of 46 states that participate in the Drug Recognition Expert, or DRE, program. State troopers as well as some police and sheriff's departments around the state use the trained experts.

The expert conducts a series of tests on the suspect and also is trained to be an expert witness when discussing the driver's impairment in court.

Blankinchip said after a traffic stop is made, a field sobriety test is given followed by a breath test. If the level doesn't measure for alcohol, a further evaluation is performed for drug impairment, including pulse checks, checks of vital signs and pupil dilation. The trained officer also looks for injection sites on the body of the suspect and takes statements. Finally, the suspect goes to the hospital for toxicity screening. It can take an hour or longer to charge an individual with drug-related DUI.

"That's a drawback and a concern because there's really nothing that can be done to speed up the process right now," Blankinchip said.

Rogersville Police Chief Terry Holden said he's seeing more cases of drug DUIs.

"We see as many DUI drug cases as we do alcohol," Holden said. "Five years ago, you just didn't have that much."

Town Creek Police Chief Jerry Garrett said the only test an officer can give for drugs is field sobriety, but there are definite differences between someone impaired from alcohol and drugs.

"The biggest thing is their speech," Garrett said. "They talk with a thick tongue, and speech is impaired worse than with alcohol usually."

He said his last few DUI cases have been for controlled substances.

"The problem is you can't walk up and smell it like you can marijuana or alcohol," he said. "Officers have to pay close attention to the drivers. A sobriety test can only go so far. One of the biggest arguments I hear from suspects of drug DUI is, 'I have a prescription for it.' "

While Garrett said people are smarter about (refraining from) drinking and driving, "they're not using their brains at all when it comes to popping pills and getting behind the wheel of a car."

Tony Faulkner, community marketing representative for Bradford Health Services, routinely deals with individuals referred from the courts after DUIs. There's been a definite increase in those cases, and the biggest growth has been in prescription pills.

"I always say that most addicts are dyslexic when it comes to taking pills," Faulkner said. "Instead of taking one every four to six hours, they take four to six pills every hour."

Blankinchip said as long a prescription pills are so readily available, "the problem will just continue to grow."

Lisa Singleton-Rickman can be reached at 256-740-5735 or [lisa.singleton-rickman@TimesDaily.com](mailto:lisa.singleton-rickman@TimesDaily.com).

---