



Teenage Drivers

The statistics are alarming. More than 300,000 teens are injured in motor vehicle accidents each year. Approximately 5000 teenagers die in motor vehicle accidents each year, slightly more than half of which are the drivers. “In 2000 alone, we recorded 4877 teen deaths as a result of preventable crashes,” says Rose McMurray, associate administrator for traffic safety programs at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). “Teen crashes have become epidemic,” says McMurray. “Teens are risk takers. They think they are immortal.”

Although teens make up only 7% of the driving population, they account for 14% of all fatalities. Drivers between the ages of 16 and 17 are three times more likely to be killed in a motor vehicle accident than people between 25 and 64 years of age. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported that in 1999, the fatalities in motor vehicle accidents were twice as high for males ages 16-19 than that for females in the same age group.

Teen drivers are involved in many more single-vehicle crashes than other drivers. Compared to other age groups, a higher portion of teenage drivers are responsible for their fatal crashes because of their own driving errors. They are more likely to veer off the road into trees, poles, or barriers. Typically these are high-speed crashes in which the driver has lost control of the vehicle.

So why do young drivers have such a poor driving performance? Three factors contribute to making the teen years so deadly for young drivers, namely inexperience, risk-taking behavior and immaturity, and greater risk exposure.

Inexperience

It takes a lot of time to learn to drive well and for driving to become an automatic response. All young drivers start out with very little understanding or knowledge of the complexities of driving a motor vehicle. Continuous small and large decision-making is required for safe driving. Good decision-making requires technical ability, good judgment and experience, all of which have to be learned over time. Most teens never have to practice driving in inclement weather or

high-speed traffic before getting a license, so when they find themselves in one of these situations they don't know how to respond.

Risk-taking behavior and immaturity

Impulsiveness is a natural teen behavior, but it often results in poor driving judgment and participation in high-risk behaviors such as speeding, inattention, drinking and driving, and not using a seat belt. Peer pressure also very often plays a role, and can encourage risk-taking behavior.

- According to the NHTSA 36% of teenagers involved in accidents in 2000 were under the influence of alcohol, and 58% were speeding at the time of the crash. 30% of teen drivers who died in car accidents had been drinking alcohol, 80% of which were unrestrained.
- Teen drivers have the lowest rate of seat belt use out of any age group.
- Teens often drive at night with other teens. 50% of fatalities that occur when a teen is at the wheel of a car happen after dark (especially on Friday and Saturday nights), even though most teen driving is done during daylight hours
- In March 2000, the Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA) reported a study that found a direct link between fatalities and the number of passengers in motor vehicles operated by teens. The research shows a direct increase in risk with each additional passenger. The reasons indicated include peer pressure to take risks, and significant distractions from the road. A recent study at the John Hopkins School of Public Health in Baltimore concluded that the more passengers a teenage driver has in his car, the more likely he will die in an accident.
- Two-thirds of teen passenger deaths occur in vehicles driven by other teenagers. In 2000, 2132 teens were killed while riding with another young driver.

Greater risk exposure

The risk of motor vehicle crashes is higher among 16-19 year olds than among any other age group. Per mile driven, teenagers are four times more likely to crash than older drivers in all types of accidents, from minor crashes involving property damage to those resulting in fatalities. The problem is the worst among 16 year olds who have the least driving experience, and an immaturity that results in risk-taking behind the wheel.

The Cost

In 2001, the estimated economic cost of police-reported motor vehicle accidents involving drivers between the ages of 15 and 20 was estimated at \$42.3 billion according to the NHTSA.

Putting Safety First

There are numerous efforts underway to keep teenagers safe behind the wheel. State and local agencies along with parent groups, schools and insurance companies are urging parents to do more to ensure the safety of their teenagers. Many states are now implementing a graduated driver's license program. These programs slowly mete out privileges that were once considered an entitlement. They include restricting teen driving during "peak accident" times such as weekend nights and certain weeknights, and putting limits on the number of passengers a teen can have in the car. Results show these laws are working.

By Sigrid Lynch, APCO Institute Training Courses Coordinator

References

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- www.roadreadyteens.com
- www.ohsu.edu (Oregon Health & Science University)
- www.lhj.com (Ladies Home Journal)
- www.progressive.com (Progressive Insurance)
- www.cdc.gov (Center for Disease Control/National Center for Injury Prevention and Control)
- www.mindconnection.com

Quiz

CDE Article – Teen Drivers

Name: _____ Date: _____

Agency: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Fax: _____

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1. Teen drivers are more likely to use their seat belts than any other age group.
 - A. True
 - B. False

2. Teenagers account for 14% of all motor vehicle accident fatalities.
 - A. True
 - B. False

3. Half the deaths that occur when a teen is behind the wheel happen after dark.
 - A. True
 - B. False

4. The inexperience of teenage drivers contributes to the high rate of accidents in this age group.
 - A. True
 - B. False

5. Research shows that the more passengers a teen driver carries the more likely he will have an accident.
 - A. True
 - B. False