

## Half kids who died in crashes had teen drivers

Two thirds of young passengers also weren't wearing seat belts, study says



Jacquelyn Martin / AP

Lauren Phillips, 15, left, talks with Rosie Jermakian, 16, after they rode home from school with Kristin Phillips, 18, right, in Bethesda, Md. Car crashes are the leading cause of death for teens, and a new study outlines the most dangerous circumstances for young passengers.

CHICAGO - Car crashes are the leading cause of death for tweens and teens, and a new study outlines some of the most dangerous circumstances: riding unbuckled with new teen drivers on high-speed roads.

These were the three biggest risk factors contributing to car crash deaths for passengers aged 8 to 17, the study found.

While young drivers have higher chances of dying, the six-year study focused on nearly 10,000 children passengers who were killed in car crashes. More than half — 54 percent — were riding with a teen driver. Drivers younger than 16 were the most dangerous.

Also, more than three-quarters of the fatal crashes occurred on roads with speed limits higher than 45 mph, and nearly two-thirds of the young passengers were not wearing seat belts, the researchers found.

Other dangerous circumstances for young passengers included drivers who'd been drinking alcohol, male teen drivers, and driving on weekends.

The message for parents is simple and sobering: Don't let your teen ride with a teen driver who has less than a year's experience driving. Insist on seat belts. And practice ways teens can resist peer pressure to ride with other teens, said Dr. Flora Koplin Winston of The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, the study's lead author.

“Knowing the risks can help parents and teens make smart decisions about which rides are safe, and which ones are off limits,” said Winston, the founder of the hospital’s Center for Injury Research and Prevention.

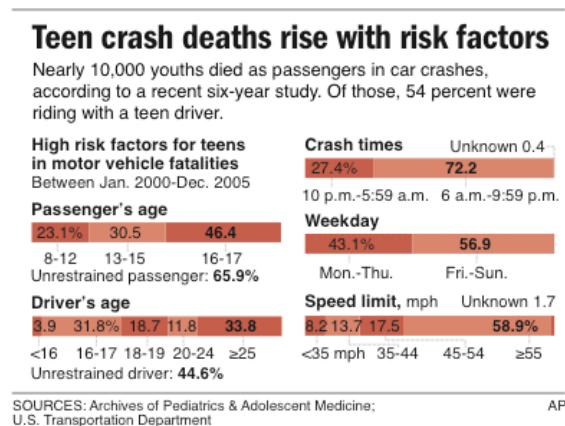
The researchers examined national data on serious car crashes including those resulting in death between 2000 and 2005. During that time, 2.5 million children aged 8 to 17 were involved in crashes and 9,807 died.

### Risk of death is double if driver is a teen

The risk of death for kids riding with drivers aged 16 to 19 was at least double that of those riding with drivers aged 25 and older. There were about two deaths per 1,000 crashes for young passengers with 25-plus drivers, versus more than four deaths in the younger group.

The study, conducted with State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co., appears in the March edition of Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine. State Farm funded the research.

Recent federal data indicate that the percentage of U.S. 16-year-olds with driver’s licenses has fallen since 1998 (from roughly 44 percent to about 30 percent), during a time when restrictions on teen driving generally increased.



But no states have all the restrictions recommended by State Farm, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Philadelphia hospital.

For example, they say the minimum age for a learner’s permits should be 16. But nine states grant them to 14-year-olds and at least 30 others give them to 15-year-olds. Also, the groups say drivers younger than 18 should not be allowed to have more than one teen passenger without adult supervision, but only 34 states have that restriction, according to data provided by the hospital and State Farm.

Rosie Jermakian, a Bethesda, Md., 16-year-old, said the study results hit home, particularly because of a recent spate of teen car crashes in the Washington, D.C. area, including one that

involved a friend. Rosie's stepmother does research at the Philadelphia hospital but was not involved in the study.

"Teen drivers don't always think," said Rosie, who has a learner's permit and hopes to get her license soon. "Sometimes they think they're just in this little bubble where they can't get hurt and they don't really think of the consequences."

Winston, the study author, said that means teen passengers and their parents have to take precautions, and the Jermakian family does.

"I've told her flat out, in regard to some of her friends who I don't believe have been well taught in these areas, that she is not to get in a car with them driving," said Joel Jermakian, Rosie's father.

Her parents also have told her to call them for a ride if she ever faces a potentially dangerous driving situation.

Jermakian said the study "reminds us that in raising teens, constant dialogue about all these kinds of things is important."

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