

New Research Shows Car Crash Deaths Increase Starting at Age 12

by NAMIC

Child passengers ages 12 to 17 are more likely to die in a car crash than younger children, according to a study released March 3 in the Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine. This risk increases with each teenage year. Conducted as part of an on-going research collaboration between The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and State Farm Insurance Companies, the study offers evidence-based guidelines for parents and policymakers to help protect this vulnerable age group.

Researchers examined 45,560 crashes involving 8- to 17-year-old passengers. Between 2000 and 2005, 9,807 passengers in this age group died in crashes.

"We saw a clear tipping point between ages 12 and 14, where child passengers became much more likely to die in a crash than their younger counterparts," says Flaura Koplin Winston, M.D., Ph.D., founder and co-scientific director of the Center for Injury Research and Prevention at CHOP. "Long before these children ever receive a learner's permit they begin to exhibit a pattern that looks more like the high fatality rates we see for teen drivers."

Of the nearly 10,000 passenger deaths studied by CHOP researchers, more than half (54.4 percent) were riding with a driver younger than 20; nearly two-thirds were unrestrained; and more than three-quarters of the crashes occurred on roads with posted speed limits of more than 45 mph. Alcohol was also a factor in one-fifth of the fatal crashes. Previous research has shown that as children grow into adolescence, they are more likely to ride in cars with drivers other than their parents, such as classmates, friends, or older siblings.

After controlling for a variety of factors, researchers found key predictors that pose the greatest risk to older child passengers.

"Riding with drivers younger than 16 years old, not wearing seat belts, and riding on higher speed roads are the three biggest factors contributing to an older child being killed in a crash," says Winston.

"Knowing the risks can help parents and teens make smart decisions about which rides are safe and which ones are off limits."

"We should not accept teen crash deaths as random accidents," says Laurette Stiles, vice president of Strategic Resources for State Farm.

"These deaths are preventable. Our hope is that teens, parents, and policymakers will work together to develop a culture of safe, smart passengers by providing guidance and reinforcing safe behaviors throughout the teen years."

CHOP researchers recommend these tips to help parents protect their children from unsafe driving situations:

Insist on seat belts. All occupants should buckle up on every trip, every time.

Set a good example. Don't drink and drive. Avoid distractions like cell phones. Obey the speed limit.

Set rules about safe passenger behaviors. Discuss what's helpful or distracting to a driver.

Monitor your child's travel. Know where he or she is going, with whom, how they are getting there, and when they will be home.

Know and trust the driver. It's not safe for your child to ride with a teen who has less than one year of driving experience.

In addition, Winston says that changes in policy, coupled with

enforcement, can help protect teen drivers and their passengers. Optimal graduated driver licensing laws that emphasize a lengthened learner's phase beginning at 16, as well as nighttime driving and passenger restrictions during the intermediate phase can help reduce the risk for teens. Primary seat belt laws for all occupants to at least age 18 are also recommended.

For more information on this study and to find additional tips, parents can visit <http://www.chop.edu/youngdrivers> to download a "Teaching Your Teen to Be a Smart Passenger" tip sheet and for video associated with this research.

Source: The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia news release
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