

TEEN DRIVERS

Getting a driver's license is a rite of passage for many teens. But unfortunately, this foray into freedom may come with a big price tag.

Accidents involving teenage drivers are the leading cause of death among adolescents, with about 10 young people ages 16 to 19 dying in teen-driven cars every day.

What causes teenagers to have such a high automobile fatality rate? "Studies by the National Institutes of Health show that the region of the brain responsible for inhibiting risky behavior isn't fully formed until the early to mid-twenties,"

says **Dr. Federico Vaca**, UCI emergency medicine physician and director of the UCI School of Medicine's Center for Trauma and Injury Prevention Research. "Even though teens can assess risk when presented with a hypothetical situation on a written test, those skills often vanish when they actually get behind the wheel." Vaca and his research staff are currently addressing some of the issues surrounding teen driver safety through a grant from the California Office of Traffic Safety.

Because the teenage brain is still under construction, many young drivers may have trouble handling on-the-spot decisions such as when to merge onto a highway or how to pace a yellow light. "Many fatal crashes are caused by overcorrecting after veering off the road or losing control when facing a roadway obstacle," says

Vaca. "And because young people often have little appreciation of their own mortality, they may speed without considering the consequences."

What's more, research shows that the chances of a crash by a 16- or 17-year-old driver double with two peers in the vehicle and quadruple with three or more. Add cell phones, iPods and other distractions to the mix and you have a recipe for disaster.

Learning to drive. To reduce teen driving accidents, California became one of the first states in the nation to implement a graduated drivers licensing law (GDL). This three-step program is designed to gradually expose aspiring drivers under



age 18 to increasingly demanding on-the-road experiences. Prior to receiving a learner's permit, teens must complete 30 hours of DMV-approved classroom instruction and at least six hours of behind-the-wheel training. During the next six months, they must have 50 hours or more of supervised practice with a parent or other adult.



Then they receive a provisional license. During the next year, they may not transport passengers under age 20, or drive between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m., unless there's an adult 25 years or older in the car. If they successfully complete the year, they're granted a full license.

Due to brain development, many young drivers may have trouble handling on-the-spot decisions.

In the years following GDL implementation, deaths and injuries from crashes involving 16-year-old drivers dropped 40 percent. Yet nearly 40,000 California teenage drivers and their passengers

died or were injured in car accidents in 2004.

To prevent these tragedies, Vaca believes it's critical for parents to log in more supervised practice time with their teens than required—and monitor their child's driving throughout the GDL process. "Studies show that kids with the most involved parents have better driving records," he says.

Furthermore, teens typically model their parents' driving behaviors. To ensure that their children drive safely,

Vaca encourages moms and

dads to observe safe driving practices themselves.

Finally, Vaca encourages parents to provide their child with a safe vehicle. "It should be equipped with lap and shoulder harness seatbelts, driver/front passenger side-impact and curtain (head protection) airbags, and other safety features," he says. "This is one time when only the best will do."

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