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INFORMATION FROM YOUR PEDIATRICIAN

Common distractions can be deadly for teen drivers

More than 5,500 teenagers die in automobile crashes every year, and car crashes are the No. 1 cause of death among 16- to 20-year-olds.

Teenagers' brains are not fully developed until they reach their 20s, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). Having their cognitive skills tested with a task such as driving is dangerous enough on its own. Adding any other distraction increases the risk of something worse happening.

Below are common distractions most teenage drivers must avoid to stay safe on the road.

Friends and family

Peers and family members, especially those around your teens' age, can influence the decisions they make behind the wheel. The AAP reports that having teenage passengers increases driving risk. Among 16- and 17-year-olds, the risk of crashing increases by 40% when driving with one teenage passenger; the risk doubles with an additional passenger. Many states have taken notice of a passenger's influence on teen drivers by placing restrictions on who can be in the vehicle with young drivers.

Cell phones

A 2011 study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* reports that 333,000 traffic crashes occur each year due to cell phone distractions. The use of cell phones while driving impairs a driver's ability to process information at a normal rate. The AAP reports that nine states have a cell phone ban on all drivers; 22 states prohibit minors from



using cell phones while driving.

Alcohol/drugs

Teenage drivers have a higher risk of crashing than adults when under the influence of alcohol or drugs. These substances alter a person's cognitive abilities, and teenagers tend to have a lower tolerance for alcohol.

Plenty of other distractions can disrupt teenage drivers, including eating and drinking, medical conditions and automobile features.

The AAP has developed a teen driving agreement that can help parents set guidelines for their young drivers. For a copy of the contract, visit www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/teen/safety/Pages/Teen-Driving-Agreement.aspx.

— Rafael Guerrero

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