

Teen car crashes on the decline

By Frederik Joelsing

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(Reuters Health) - The number of teen drivers involved in deadly car crashes is plummeting, U.S. government researchers said Thursday in a bit of good news to parents with youngsters behind the wheel.

Car accidents remain the leading cause of death in this age group, followed by homicide and suicide.

"These first few years of driving are a special period," said Ruth A. Shults of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. "We have made impressive progress and we still have more work to do."

Between 2004 and 2008, the number of 16- and 17-year-old drivers in fatal car crashes fell by more than a third, from 2,230 to 1,437, Shults and colleagues report in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

That continues a long-term decrease from 1996, amounting to an overall drop of about half, Shults told Reuters Health.

But that doesn't mean parents should just relax and toss the car keys to their kids, she said. This week the CDC launched a new campaign, called "Parents Are the Key," encouraging parents to be more actively involved in their children's driving.

"Parents really have a major influence on safe driving," Shults said, adding that parents should expose their kids to driving in all conditions -- rain, snow, nighttime -- while in the car with them.

"One of the primary reasons that this age group has a higher accident rate is driving inexperience," Shults explained. "We find that teenage drivers, for each mile driven, crash at about four times the rate of older drivers."

In 1996, 36 out of 100,000 drivers under 18 were involved in fatal crashes, compared to 16.7 in 2008.

With a rate of less than 10 in 100,000, New York and New Jersey share a first place as the safest states to drive for youngsters. Wyoming had the highest rate at 59.6 per 100,000.

Fatal crashes involving drivers over 18 also fell by 20 percent in recent years, the CDC researchers note, from 20.5 per 100,000 in 2004 to 16.3 per 100,000 in 2008.

Why the rates are dropping is unclear, but the authors say one reason could be economic hardship and rising gasoline prices.

Another could be newer laws, so-called graduated driver licensing programs, which restrict teen driving in 49 states and the District of Columbia.

The CDC's tips to parents of young drivers can be found at www.cdc.gov/PARENTSARETHEKEY/.

SOURCE: link.reuters.com/syg69p Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, October 22, 2010.


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