



Lewis County Public Health & Social Services

Health Beat

Set Your Teen Driver Up to Succeed

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October 18-24 is National Teen Driver Safety Week – a time to remember just how much our teens are at risk behind the wheel. While the number of teen deaths in car crashes has decreased slightly in recent years nationally, teen driver crashes are still robbing too many kids of their futures.

Believe it or not, motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for teens (15-18 years old) in the United States, ahead of all other types of injury, disease, or violence. And sadly, it does happen right here in Lewis County. 220 crashes involving teen drivers were reported in Lewis County in 2019. Of those, 57 caused injuries, including one fatality.

Government has tried to help teens get through their first driving years safely through legislation, most notably the intermediate driver license laws for drivers under age 18. These laws limit the number of passengers, restrict certain nighttime hours when teens can be on the road, include a no-exceptions ban on cell phone use, and enforce zero-tolerance for alcohol or drug-related offenses.

While some may think these rules are too strict, they are based on evidence. Young drivers face increased risks due to both their inexperience behind the wheel, and immaturity when making critical decisions. Statistics compiled by the Washington Traffic Safety Commission reveal:

- 32% of traffic fatalities involved young drivers, even though they only comprise 13% of licensed drivers in Washington.

- Impairment was a factor in 57% of fatal crashes with a young driver.
- 60% of high school seniors reported riding in the car with a driver who was texting.
- The chances of a young driver being killed in a crash increases 44% for every mile driven when they have a passenger under the age of 21 in the car with them.

The government can set the rules, but it's parents who can be the biggest influencers on teens' choices behind the wheel. By the time teens get behind the wheel, they will have a decade or more of learned behavior from the back seat. That means new teen drivers mirror the driving behavior they have seen their parents do more than what parents tell them to do. It's hard to clean up bad habits, but having a new driver in the family to keep safe can be good incentive to try.

Parents should have conversations with their teens about the important rules they need to follow to stay safe behind the wheel of a motor vehicle. Talk about the greatest dangers for teen drivers: alcohol, inconsistent or no seat belt use, distracted and drowsy driving, speeding, and number of passengers.

You have spent your children's entire lives up to this point watching over them, teaching them, and doing everything you can to keep them safe. Now they are an inexperienced driver who will be out of your sight, beyond your immediate help. And as my parents told me, and I told my kids – tell your kids it's safe and smart to call you any time, from any place, for any problem they are facing. Their safety comes first.

Model good driver behavior, teach them to identify and understand risks, and spend time in the car while they gain valuable experience. Set them up to succeed . . . and survive.

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