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## Online only: Physicians say failure to buckle-up is root cause of teen fatalities

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The physician-led traffic safety advocacy group called End Needless Death on Our Roadways recently announced data showing young drivers and passengers (16-20 years old) are killed in motor vehicle crashes in higher numbers than any other age group traveling U.S. roads. Even more disturbing: failure to buckle up appears to be a root cause of this needless death.

Nationwide, young drivers ages 16-20 make up only 6 percent of the driving population, and they travel far less than individuals in older age groups, yet they are killed in higher numbers than any other age group.

“In 2004 alone, 5,135 young vehicle occupants were killed in motor vehicle crashes. Tragically, many of these fatalities and serious injuries could have been prevented if the vehicle’s occupants were wearing a safety belt,” said Thomas Esposito, MD, co-chair of End Needless Deaths on Our Roadways and vice-chairman of the Chicago Committee on Trauma of the American College of Surgeons.

Safety belt use continues to increase and traffic fatalities are on the decline, particularly in those states that have passed primary safety belt laws. Primary safety belt laws that allow police to stop and ticket motorists who fail to buckle up have proven to change behavior and save lives.

Unfortunately, in states that do not have a primary safety belt law, motor vehicle fatalities remain troubling, particularly for young motorists.

“In fact, in many states, motor vehicle fatalities among teen motorists are at epidemic proportions,” Esposito said.

Leaders in Washington have recognized the crisis caused by unbuckled motorists and have taken positive action.

“To increase safety belt use and save lives, Congress has established an incentive program that provides grant money to states that pass primary safety belt laws,” said Andrea Barthwell, co-chair of End Needless Death on Our Roadways and former deputy director for demand reduction for the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. “In addition to saving lives, under Congress’ plan, states could realize millions in federal grant money if they pass and implement a primary safety belt law.”

In states that do not have a primary safety belt law on the books, it is even more crucial that parents step in and take the lead in ensuring their young child’s early driving experience is safe. To assist in this effort, End Needless Death on Our Roadways, along with the National Safety Council and Discount Tire Company, have developed You, Safely Home, a comprehensive, teen-driver contract created to help keep young drivers safe throughout their early driving experience and beyond.

“It is critical that teens understand the inherent risks of not wearing safety belts and other risky driving behaviors. You, Safely Home will help families understand and manage the journey teens will travel from beginner to independent driver,” Barthwell said. “It is our goal to reduce the level of teen traffic fatalities and minimize the anxieties and uncertainties parents of new drivers feel by providing both teens and their parents with specific actions that have been shown to curb the risks for teen drivers.”

You, Safely Home addresses the important issues a parent should discuss with a young driver including safety belt use, impaired driving, passenger restrictions, curfew and vehicle equipment. You, Safely Home is available online at [www.EndNeedlessDeath.org](http://www.EndNeedlessDeath.org).

“It is critical that we all work together to end the needless death associated with motor vehicle crashes by providing incentives and tools that encourage safe driving behaviors by teen motorists,” Barthwell said.

*Story courtesy End Needless Death on our Roadways, Feb. 22, 2006. This story does not contain original reporting by The Nation's Health staff.*

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