

DANGEROUS CARGO

New research shows that for teenage drivers, the chances of a fatal wreck increases with each passenger in the car. This finding pertains to the military because there are more than 100,000 soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Air Force personnel who are 19 years old and younger (28,000 in the Marine Corps and 26,000 in the Navy).

The driving habits of these teenagers are the same as all teenagers in the United States. They face the same peer pressures and the same risks. The only difference between the military teenage driver and one living at home is no one takes away the keys from the military person—unless you count your chief or staff sergeant.

The findings in the April 2000 issue of *Journal of the American Medical Association* underscores how experience goes hand-in-hand with safety.

“When you have a teen driver and teen passengers, the culture of the car changes,” says Julie Rochman, spokeswoman for the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety in Arlington, Va. “Seat belts come off, speeds go up, the radio blares, and drivers are subjected to all manner of distraction.”

Auto mishaps are the leading killer of U.S. teens. In 1998 alone, more than 5,600 teens (aged 13 to 19) died in crashes. Alcohol is a big factor in adult road deaths, but among teens, the crucial factors are inexperience and immaturity.

In the latest study, researchers at the Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health and the

Insurance Institute for Highway Safety used mishap data from 1992 to 1997 to estimate how having passengers in the car affected the risk of death for 16- and 17-year-old drivers. [Note: Since there are no 16-year-olds in the Navy or Marine Corps, we will only give the results of the study on 17-year-old drivers.—Ed.]

With one passenger, a 17-year-old’s risk of dying behind the wheel rose 50 percent; two more in the car led to nearly a 2.6-fold higher chance of a fatal crash. And having three passengers aboard more than tripled the driver’s risk of death. The risks of death were somewhat greater for men than for women.

The researchers also found that teens who drive between 10 p.m. and midnight are up to three times more likely to die in a wreck than when they drive between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. Again, this risk rises with the number of passengers.

Li-Hui Chen, a research associate at Johns Hopkins and lead author of the study, says her group wasn’t surprised to find that more passengers boost the driver’s chances of dying in a wreck. But, she says, the researchers were puzzled by another bit of evidence: When teens drive with passengers in their 20s, the ratio of fatal crashes to nonfatal crashes increases.

She speculates that may be related to alcohol use, since the adults could be giving liquor to the underage youth. **A**

Choose Your Buddy Wisely

At first glance, you may think we’re sending mixed signals to our young people. On one hand, we tell them to use the buddy system, and then we say that having more people in a car increases their chances of getting killed in a wreck. We do want people to use the buddy system, but we want you to have a responsible buddy, especially when you’re behind the wheel, no matter what age you are.

Responsible buddies look out for one another. They try to keep their buddies out of trouble. They don’t encourage reckless driving, speeding, drinking and driving, or ignoring traffic laws. And a responsible older buddy would never encourage drinking or give alcohol to anyone under 21.