HEALTH BASICS

# Safe driving for teens

Safe driving for teens means building habits that reduce crash and injury risks for new drivers.

**WHAT IT IS**
Practical habits and limits that reduce driving risk for teens

**WHERE IT COMES UP**
Learner permits, driving practice, licensing, and family rules

**WHY IT MATTERS**
Fewer crashes, injuries, and unsafe driving choices

**WHAT IT IS NOT**
Not a disease or diagnosis

**WHO TO ASK**
Licensing agency, driving instructor, pharmacist, or healthcare professional

**HOW IT IS CHECKED**
Driving test, vision screening, and supervised practice

## Overview

Safe driving for teens is a set of skills, choices, and limits for people who are learning to drive or have recently earned a licence. It is not a disease or diagnosis.

New drivers have less experience judging speed, distance, road conditions, and other drivers' actions. Some driving tasks are still unfamiliar, so they require more attention. Practice helps these skills become more reliable, but practice should take place gradually and under suitable supervision.

Road rules and licensing systems differ by location. Many places use graduated driver licensing. This introduces driving privileges in stages and may limit night driving, young passengers, or phone use. Teens and supervising adults should check the rules for the licence or permit where they live.

## How it works

Driving requires several abilities at the same time. You must see hazards, understand what they mean, choose a response, and control the vehicle. Attention may need to shift quickly

between the road, mirrors, signs, pedestrians, and traffic around you.

Safe practice starts in lower-risk settings and becomes more challenging as skills improve. A learner might begin on quiet, familiar roads before practising in heavier traffic, at night, or in poor weather. The supervising driver should meet local legal requirements and be ready to give calm, clear directions.

Vehicle safety also matters. Seat position, mirrors, head restraints, and seat belts should be adjusted before the vehicle moves. The driver should know how to use the lights, windscreen wipers, demister, hazard lights, and emergency brake.

A driving test checks certain skills at one point in time. It does not show how someone will respond to every road, weather, passenger, or distraction.

## Why it matters for your health

Motor vehicle crashes can cause head injuries, spinal injuries, broken bones, internal injuries, and emotional distress. Seat belts reduce the chance of serious injury, but they do not make risky driving safe.

Driving can also affect passengers, pedestrians, cyclists, and people in other vehicles. A brief lapse in attention may leave too little time to stop or steer safely.

Sleep, vision, medical conditions, and medicines can affect alertness or vehicle control. For example, some medicines cause drowsiness, blurred vision, slower reactions, or dizziness. Alcohol, cannabis, and other drugs can impair judgement and coordination. Mixing substances may make impairment harder to predict.

## What can go wrong

Distracted driving happens when attention moves away from driving. Texting is especially risky because it can take your eyes, hands, and attention away from the road. Calls, navigation, food, music controls, passengers, and strong emotions can also distract you. Hands-free devices do not remove mental distraction.

Unsafe speed includes driving faster than the posted limit and driving too fast for rain, snow, darkness, traffic, or road conditions. Speed reduces the time available to react and can make crash injuries more severe.

Passenger-related risk can increase when conversation, noise, or social pressure affects the driver. Local licensing rules may limit young passengers during the first months of independent

driving.

Drowsy driving can cause slow reactions, poor decisions, or brief episodes of sleep. Loud music, cold air, or an open window does not reliably restore alertness. A driver who is struggling to stay awake should stop in a safe place rather than trying to push through.

Impaired driving includes driving after alcohol, cannabis, illegal drugs, or misused medicines. Prescription and non-prescription medicines can also impair driving even when taken as directed. Laws for young drivers and substances differ by location, but impairment is unsafe regardless of the legal limit.

Health issues such as fainting, seizures, very low blood sugar, sudden vision problems, or severe daytime sleepiness may interfere with safe driving. Licensing rules for medical conditions vary. A healthcare professional can assess the health issue, while the licensing agency can explain legal requirements.

After a crash, call emergency services for someone who is unconscious, has trouble breathing, has severe bleeding, has a seizure, or may have a serious head, neck, or back injury. Do not move an injured person unless there is an immediate danger, such as fire or moving traffic.

## What you can do

Check the restrictions on your permit or licence. These may cover supervision, passengers, night driving, seat belts, and phone use. Do not assume that rules are the same in another state, province, or country.

Build experience gradually. Practise different routes and conditions with an appropriate supervising driver, but avoid adding several new challenges at once. Keep a record of practice if your licensing system requires one.

Before moving:

If you need to use a phone, change navigation, or deal with a demanding passenger, pull over somewhere legal and safe first. A red light or traffic queue is not a safe place to start texting.

Agree on a plan for getting home without driving after alcohol, cannabis, other drugs, or severe tiredness. The plan might include calling a trusted adult, using public transport, or staying where you are. It should allow a teen to ask for help without delaying because of fear of punishment.

Read medicine labels for warnings about driving or operating machinery. Ask a pharmacist or prescribing healthcare professional whether a new medicine, dose change, or combination could affect driving. Do not stop a prescribed medicine without discussing it with the

prescriber.

Arrange routine healthcare follow-up for ongoing trouble seeing road signs, repeated sleepiness while driving, or medicine side effects. Stop driving and seek prompt medical advice after fainting, a seizure, unexplained loss of awareness, or a sudden change in vision. Sudden symptoms that continue, occur with weakness or trouble speaking, or cause a crash may require emergency care.

- Buckle every occupant and adjust the seat and mirrors
- Set navigation, music, and climate controls
- Put the phone out of reach or enable driving mode
- Check fuel or battery charge and basic warning lights
- Confirm that you are rested and able to focus

## Common questions

Does passing the driving test mean a teen is fully prepared?

No. Passing shows that the driver met the tested requirements. Experience with unfamiliar roads, poor weather, heavy traffic, and unexpected hazards develops over time.

Is hands-free phone use safe?

It may keep your hands on the wheel, but conversation can still take attention away from driving. The safest approach is to avoid calls while the vehicle is moving and stop safely if communication cannot wait.

Can friends help a new driver feel calmer?

Sometimes, but passengers can also create noise, pressure, or distraction. Follow passenger restrictions and choose quiet, supportive passengers when practice is allowed.

What if a teen feels too tired to drive home?

They should not continue driving. Stop somewhere safe and arrange another driver, a ride, or a suitable place to rest. Planning this option before going out makes it easier to use.

Should a health condition automatically stop someone from driving?

Not always. The effect depends on the condition, how well it is controlled, its effect on driving abilities, and local licensing rules. Ask the relevant healthcare professional about medical safety and the licensing agency about legal requirements.

## Sources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Teen Drivers and Passengers
- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration: Teen Driving
- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration: Distracted Driving
- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration: Drowsy Driving
- US Food and Drug Administration: Some Medicines and Driving Don't Mix