

Graduated Driver Licensing

What is graduated driver licensing?

It's a system designed to phase in young beginners to full driving privileges as they become more mature and develop their driving skills. Versions of graduated licensing are in effect in New Zealand; Victoria, Australia; and several Canadian provinces. Beginning with Florida in 1996, graduated licensing systems also have been adopted in most U.S. states.

There are 3 stages to a graduated system: a supervised learner's period; an intermediate license (after passing the driver test) that limits driving in high-risk situations except under supervision; and then a license with full privileges, available after completing the first 2 stages.

The best systems include a learner's stage beginning at age 16 and lasting at least 6 months, 30 or more hours of supervised driving, plus restrictions on unsupervised night driving and passengers during the first 6 to 12 months of licensure. The nighttime driving restriction should start at 9 or 10 p.m., and no more than 1 teen passenger should be allowed any time of day.

No state law meets or exceeds all of these requirements, but most states do impose some of the core requirements. Some states add other requirements including belt use provisions, cellphone use restrictions, penalty systems so that violations result in license suspension or extension of the holding period, and driver education.

Are passenger restrictions important?

They're essential components of graduated licensing. Crash risk for teenage drivers increases incrementally with 1, 2, or 3 or more passengers. With 3 or more, fatal crash risk is about 3 times higher than when a beginner is driving alone.¹

The presence of passengers is a major contributor to the teenage death toll.^{13,14} About two-thirds of all crash deaths of teens that involve 16-year-old drivers occur when the beginners were driving with teen passengers. Studies indicate that passenger restrictions can reduce this problem.^{15,16,17,18}

Do parents support graduated licensing?

Yes, parents strongly favor it. Parents of teenagers surveyed in 1996 in Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey, and New York said they strongly support graduated licensing.^{20,21} An Insurance Institute for Highway Safety survey of parents of young drivers in California who had gone through the graduated licensing process found 95 percent of the parents supported a 6-month period of supervised driving. Ninety-four percent favored night driving restrictions, 84 percent favored restricting teenage passengers during the first 6 months, and 79 percent of the parents said they favor a licensing system that includes all of these components. The survey was conducted in 2000.²² Parents of teenagers and other adults were interviewed in Connecticut in 2008 when new graduated licensing laws were being considered. The majority supported an increase in required practice driving hours, a longer permit period, a longer-term passenger restriction, and a nighttime driving restriction starting earlier than midnight.²³

Source: Insurance Institute for Highway Safety and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Interactive Wireless Communication Devices

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Policy Statement

The primary responsibility of the driver is to operate a motor vehicle safely. The task of driving requires full attention and focus. Drivers should resist engaging in any activity that takes their eyes and attention off the road for more than a couple of seconds. In some circumstances even a second or two can make all the difference in a driver being able to avoid a crash.

Of special concern is the use of electronic entertainment and communication devices, especially cell phones. The relative risks of the various tasks drivers engage in are still being assessed, but in general the safest course of action is to refrain from using a cell phone while driving, which includes talking, dialing, and texting. NHTSA recommends that States prohibit novice drivers from using electronic communication devices (including cell phones) during the learners and intermediate stages of a three-stage graduated driver license (GDL) program.

What is distracted driving?

There are three main types of distraction:

- Visual — taking your eyes off the road
- Manual — taking your hands off the wheel
- Cognitive — taking your mind off what you're doing

Distracted driving is any non-driving activity a person engages in while operating a motor vehicle. Such activities have the potential to distract the person from the primary task of driving and increase the risk of crashing.

What do the studies say about the relative risk of cell phone use when compared to other tasks like drinking or eating?

Most crashes involve a relatively unique set of circumstances that make precise calculations of risk for engaging in different behaviors very difficult. Thus, the available research does not provide a definitive answer as to which behavior is riskier. Different studies and analyses have arrived at different relative risk estimates for different tasks. However, they all show elevated risk (or poorer driving performance) when the driver is distracted. It is also important to keep in mind that some activities are carried out more frequently and for longer periods of time and may result in greater risk.

Who are the offenders, and how great a problem is this?

Every driver has from time-to-time had their attention drawn away from the driving task. The choice to engage in non-driving tasks is usually under the individual's control and some people do so more frequently. The younger, inexperienced drivers under 20 years old have the highest proportion of distraction-related fatal crashes. They are not alone. At any given moment during the daylight hours, over 800,000 vehicles are being driven by someone using a hand-held cell phone. People of all ages are using a variety of hand-held devices, such as cell phones, mp3 players, personal digital assistants, and navigation devices, when they are behind the wheel.

Is it safe to use hands-free (headset, speakerphone, or other device) cell phones while driving?

The available research indicates that cell phone use while driving, whether it is a hands-free or hand-held device, degrades a driver's performance. The driver is more likely to miss key visual and audio cues needed to avoid a crash. Hand-held devices may be slightly worse, but hands-free devices are not risk-free.

In an emergency should I use my cell phone while driving?

As a general rule, drivers should make every effort to move to a safe place off of the road before using a cell phone. However, in emergency situations a driver must use their judgment regarding the urgency of the situation and the necessity to use a cell phone while driving.

Is talking on a cell phone any worse than having a conversation with someone in the car?

Some research findings show both activities to be equally risky, while others show cell phone use to be more risky. A significant difference between the two is the fact that a passenger can monitor the driving situation along with the driver and pause for, or alert the driver to, potential hazards, whereas a person on the other end of the phone line is unaware of the roadway situation. However, when two or more teens are in the vehicle, crash risk is increased. And while we can't say for sure this is attributable to distraction, we are confident that distraction plays a role.

What is NHTSA doing to try to combat this problem?

NHTSA will implement its new multi-year Distraction Plan and Research Agenda that will further examine driver communications and entertainment devices, including cell phones, and will also continue to monitor the research of others on this subject. As we learn more and as wireless technologies evolve and expand, NHTSA will make its findings public.

NHTSA is encouraging State and local government partners to reduce fatalities and crashes by identifying ways that States can address distracted driving in their Strategic Highway Safety Plans. Our state and local partners are keys to any success we will have in addressing distracted driving. NHTSA has a demonstration project with jurisdictions in Connecticut and New York to determine whether the high visibility enforcement model of enhanced, visible enforcement and focused media can reduce driver's use of cell phones while driving. Should this approach prove to be effective, we will promote this strategy with other jurisdictions.

How do the States deal with this problem?

Responses vary by State. Many States have laws banning certain type of distractions. Currently 21 States and the District of Columbia prohibit novice drivers from using electronic communication devices (including cell phones) during the learners and intermediate stages of a three-stage graduated driver license (GDL) program. Six States ban hand held cell phone use for all drivers, and 19 States ban texting by all drivers.

States can take some steps immediately to reduce the risks of distracted driving. One example is installing rumble strips along roads to get the attention of drivers before they leave the roadway and/or deviate from their lane. States can also adopt and enforce laws to ban distracted driving; NHTSA recently developed, in conjunction with 20 safety groups and associations, a sample distracted driving law.

Are there any Federal laws regarding distractions in vehicles?

Generally, distraction laws fall under the jurisdiction of individual States. However, President Obama has issued an executive order prohibiting federal employees from texting while driving on government business or with government equipment. In addition, contractors conducting government business are prohibited from texting while conducting business on behalf of the government

In addition, in January 2010, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration enacted an interim ban that prohibits commercial vehicle drivers from texting while behind the wheel. In March 2010, a proposed rule was announced that would make that ban stronger and more durable.

Although not a law, DOT recently launched a national campaign to encourage the public to get involved in ending distracted driving. "Put It Down" focuses on the key messages that drivers can't do two things

at once, everyone has a personal responsibility to pay attention while behind the wheel, and the implementation of legislation and high visibility enforcement will lead to increased consequences for distracted driving. Learn more about “Put It Down” and access materials you can use at www.distracted.gov.

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