

# Female auto crash rates increase alarmingly; airbags can be dangerous for tall and small people

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Automobile crashes remain the leading cause of death for adolescents and young adults, compounded by the effects of alcohol and failure to use seatbelts. Although males have tended to be associated with alcohol-related crashes, a study to be presented at the 2007 Society for Academic Emergency Medicine (SAEM) Annual Meeting shows that young females are beginning to show an alarming increase in fatal automobile crashes related to alcohol use and a failure to use seatbelts.

The study, led by Virginia W. Tsai MD, Department of Emergency Medicine, University of California, Irvine Medical Center, showed that over a 10 year period (1995-2004) females began to “catch up” to males in risky behaviors and while seatbelt use increased for both males and females, the increase for women was smaller. When combined with other factors such as cell phone use while driving and distractions from other teenagers in the car, the trends for young women are not positive.

According to Dr. Tsai, "Young females should not be overlooked or underestimated in risky driving habits and involvement in alcohol-related crashes. ED staff should consider the teachable moment when they come across the young person involved in a crash no matter if they are male or female. They are both at considerable risk for serious and fatal crashes especially if there is alcohol involved. While they may be in the ED for a minor crash...the time and conversation the staff may have with them in the ED may save their lives."

In another study to be presented at the same meeting, Craig Newgard, MD, Assistant Professor, Emergency Medicine and Public Health & Preventive Medicine, Oregon Health and Science University, analyzed crash data for over 65,000 front-seat occupants and found that airbags, while effective for people of medium stature (5'3" to 5'11") were actually harmful to people smaller than 4'11" and taller than 6'3". Body weight was not a contributing factor to injury rates. Since many "smart" airbags use body weight to determine how the airbag deploys, these data suggest that a new method needs to be found. According to the author, "In this 11-year sample of drivers and front passengers, occupants of small and large stature appeared to be at risk of serious injury from an air bag. These findings suggest that to maximize safety such occupants should not be seated in front of an air bag when traveling in a motor vehicle."

The presentation on female accident rates is entitled "Trends in Young Female Drivers in Alcohol-Related Fatal Crashes over Ten Years, 1995-2004" by Virginia W. Tsai MD. The paper will be presented at the 2007 SAEM Annual Meeting, May 16-19, 2007, Chicago, IL.

The airbag study is "Stature, Body Weight and Serious Injury from Air Bags Among Adult Drivers and Passengers Involved in Motor Vehicle Crashes" by Craig D. Newgard, MD.

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