

# Mental Stress Doesn't Distract Young Drivers at the Wheel

May 18 2010, By Amy Sutton

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Teen drivers are four times more likely to be involved in motor vehicle crashes than older drivers, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, but anxiety and depression do not play a role in teen motor vehicle accidents, a new study finds.

“Psychological distress does not appear to pose the risk we thought it did for [motor vehicle crash](#) in young people,” said lead author Alexandra Martiniuk, Ph.D., a senior research fellow at the George Institute for International Health at the University of Sydney in Australia.

The study, which appears online in the [Journal of Adolescent Health](#), followed 20,822 new drivers in New South Wales for two years. Participants from ages 17 to 24 reported whether they had symptoms of psychological distress, such as nervousness, restlessness, depression or sadness. Researchers used police database records to link teens’ responses to future motor vehicle crashes.

During the study, 1,495 teens and young adults had one or more crashes and 289 had a single crash, but stress levels did not appear to raise a teen’s risk.

“No group of young drivers with psychological distress had an increased risk of crash.

We did not find an increased risk of motor vehicle crash for young drivers who had severe [psychological distress](#) — a level of distress that

correlates with a mental health diagnosis,” Martiniuk said.

In fact, teens with some anxiety or depression were 15 percent less apt to crash their vehicles over the two-year period, Martiniuk said.

The authors theorized that [young drivers](#) with symptoms of mild anxiety and depression might be less prone to take risks and more likely to be vigilant behind the wheel.

“I was really surprised that there was not a relationship between being in a car accident and being slightly or significantly distressed. The findings are counterintuitive and that makes them all the more interesting,” said Kim Dolgin, Ph.D., an adolescent psychologist at Ohio Wesleyan University.

Dolgin — who had no affiliation with the study — called the data analysis “sophisticated and appropriate” and said that the large sample size strengthened the study’s findings.

However, Dolgin also said that the time lag between when they measured participants’ mood states and the crash could skew results.

“Teen mood states are labile. Teens can be pretty stressed this month and then feel fine next month. So what we don't know from this study is, ‘If I am depressed and anxious right now, am I more likely to be in a car accident?’ That’s an unfortunate limitation,” Dolgin said.

**More information:** Martiniuk ALC, et al. Does psychological distress increase the risk for motor vehicle crashes in young people? Findings from the DRIVE study. J Adol Health online, 2010.

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