

Research shows travel combined with alcohol, weather can be deadly

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How have driving patterns during the Thanksgiving holidays changed during recent years? The answer to this question may help you avoid a crash, or at least the congestion that goes with most holiday travel.

A recent study conducted by The University of Alabama Center for Advanced Public Safety comparing [Thanksgiving](#) weeks during the past 10 years found a number of changing factors that could impact safety.

One primary finding indicates that Interstate crashes are up about 25 percent during the three most recent Thanksgiving-week years, reflecting travel trends of people driving in areas unfamiliar to them. UA researchers defined Thanksgiving week as the Monday before Thanksgiving through the Sunday after it.

During Thanksgiving week, the increased travel and the mix of holiday and commuter roadway users are the primary causes of crashes. The holiday/commuter mix problem is further complicated because of an increase in the number of out-of-state drivers (about 34 percent higher than expected from neighboring states) and an increase in those who are greater than 25 miles from home (22 percent higher than expected).

However, the primary cause of fatalities is the increased use of alcohol that takes place during the holiday break. Throughout the past three years, the researchers said there has been a shocking increase in several alcohol indicators during Thanksgiving week, as compared to the previous seven years. Reported alcohol/drug DUI crashes are more than

25 percent higher during Thanksgiving week than a typical week the rest of the year.

The non-work schedule essentially creates several party nights in a row, to the extent that the number of nighttime crashes is about 84 percent higher than the average of other weeks of the year – late night crashes are correlated with alcohol use. Another proxy for alcohol/drugs is single-vehicle crashes, which have increased about 10 percent in the most recent three years compared to the previous seven.

In addition to alcohol, weather factors cannot be underestimated. For example, in the 2010 Thanksgiving week, the Tuesday before Thanksgiving had 147 more crashes than either the Monday or the Wednesday of that week. However, 269 of these crashes occurred in wet weather, as opposed to 61 for the two other relatively dry days.

“The advice is to watch the weather because bad weather crashes are often totally out of the innocent driver’s control,” explained Dr. Allen Parrish, director of UA’s Center for Advanced [Public Safety](#). “Our weather forecasts are quite accurate, and radar is available on many cell phones. When a storm appears, take a driving break until it passes.”

For the last few years, the researchers have also noted a change in the days that people are leaving on their Thanksgiving trips. Previous studies showed that Wednesday was the heavy traffic day of the holiday week. During the last three years, the researchers have noticed that about 15 percent fewer people leave on Wednesday, as indicated by the number of crashes that occur on the various days. This has made Wednesday fairly comparable to Monday and Tuesday, meaning that leaving on any of these days now has about the same risk.

“Leaving on Sunday reduces the risks significantly, and Thanksgiving Day is the best time to travel with very few vehicles on the roadways,”

said Parrish.

In addition to the late night party hours being over-represented, the evening hours of 6 to 8 p.m., which are after the typical afternoon rush hours, are significantly higher in crashes during Thanksgiving week than other weeks. It would be wise to take a half day off and get started on your trip around noon, both on longer trips and on trips where the rush hour and later traffic can be avoided altogether.

Other Influencing Factors

- Deer activity increases this time of year. Avoiding driving at dusk and later will reduce the number of deer strikes, which are about five times higher during Thanksgiving week than they are for the rest of the year.
- The shift in the age trend throughout the past 10 years is quite interesting, the researchers said, with teenage drivers having significantly fewer crashes as opposed to those over 28, and especially in the 47-57 group. This is probably attributable to the fact that higher gas prices and a worsening economy tend to hit the very young and the very old the most.
- The use of cell phones, texting and other electronic distractions are about the same during Thanksgiving week as other times of the year. National studies have shown that about one out of every nine roadway collisions involve distracted driving, such as texting, talking on a cell phone, eating or playing with the navigation system.

Safety Recommendations

- UA researchers recommend the following to help make your Thanksgiving travel safer:

- Do not drink and drive; do not ride with anyone who has had any alcohol or drug use; and avoid the late-night hours when you could become an innocent victim of an impaired driver.
- Watch the weather, and, if at all possible, avoid times of decreased visibility or wet pavement. If caught in a storm, take a break from driving until the shower passes.
- All of the weekdays before Thanksgiving have about the same chances for incurring a [crash](#), with increased chances in the late afternoon. Crash avoidance time strategy would be to leave the Sunday before Thanksgiving or as early in the day on Monday through Wednesday as possible. Thanksgiving Day is by far the best time to travel from a crash avoidance point of view.
- Travelers in rural areas, especially where deer are protected, should recognize the nocturnal nature of deer and the fact they start to seek food at dusk during this time of year. Be especially careful in new construction areas where rye has been planted as a cover on re-worked shoulders and roadsides.
- Cell phones should be delegated to a passenger to keep the driver free from distractions.
- Fasten all safety belts and restraints. This is your number one defense against any of your family becoming a fatality victim.
- Do not count on airbags – airbags have saved thousands of lives, but they are no substitute for seatbelts.
- Keep your speed down – every 10 miles per hour reduction in speed cuts your probability of being killed in half. Your GPS will calculate that an extra 5 mph does not buy you much time at all, but it could cost you

an expensive ticket or your life.

- Drive to reduce your risk – back off instead of tailgating, stay out of the blind spots of large trucks and let aggressive drivers pass you.

The www.SafeHomeAlabama.gov website provides a comprehensive view of all known organized traffic safety efforts in the state of Alabama.

Provided by University of Alabama

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