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Mass.gov

Transportation Safety and Injury Prevention

Learn about safe driving, pedestrian, and bicycling practices.

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Safety belts

Among drivers and front-seat passengers, safety belts reduce the risk of death by 45%, and cut the risk of serious injury by 50%. In Massachusetts in 2017, the safety belt usage rate was 73.8%.

Massachusetts Safety Belt Law

Massachusetts law requires every person in a passenger motor vehicle to wear a safety belt or sit in a child passenger restraint. Any driver who is stopped by a law enforcement officer for a traffic violation, and is not wearing a safety belt can be fined \$25.

For more information, [Chapter 3: Safety First \(/doc/drivers-manual/download\)](/doc/drivers-manual/download) of the [Massachusetts Driver's Manual \(/doc/drivers-manual/download\)](/doc/drivers-manual/download) thoroughly details safety belt laws in the Commonwealth.

Prevention/Best Practices

The best way to protect yourself in a crash is to always wear your safety belt. Safety belts save lives for both drivers and passengers.

The Centers for Disease Control recommends enhanced enforcement of existing seat belt laws. Enhanced enforcement programs seek to better support safety belt laws by either increasing the average number of citations each officer issues or by increasing the number of officers on patrol. These measures are supported by publicity campaigns, like the successful “[Click It or Ticket \(https://www.nhtsa.gov/click-it-or-ticket-seat-belts-save-lives\)](https://www.nhtsa.gov/click-it-or-ticket-seat-belts-save-lives)” initiative. Research has shown that enhanced enforcement programs increase seat belt use by a median of 16 percentage points.

Resources

- [Occupant protection \(/service-details/occupant-protection\)](/service-details/occupant-protection)
- [Seat Belts: Get the Facts \(https://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/seatbelts/facts.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/seatbelts/facts.html)
- [Seat Belts: The Best Way to Protect Yourself on the Road \(https://blog.mass.gov/blog/safety/seat-belts-the-best-way-to-protect-yourself-when-youre-on-the-road/\)](https://blog.mass.gov/blog/safety/seat-belts-the-best-way-to-protect-yourself-when-youre-on-the-road/)
- [Policy Impact: Seat Belts \(https://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/seatbeltbrief/index.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/seatbeltbrief/index.html)

Child Passenger Safety

Motor vehicle injuries are a leading cause of death among children in the United States. But many of these deaths are preventable.

Each year in Massachusetts, an average of 3 children ages 7 years and younger die as passengers in motor vehicle crashes. In addition, Massachusetts children ages 7 years and younger are treated for about 2,100 nonfatal injuries from motor vehicle crashes each year in Massachusetts hospitals.

Massachusetts Child Passenger Law

In Massachusetts, any child under the age of 8 and less than 57 inches tall must be in a car seat or booster seat when in a moving vehicle.

Prevention/Best Practices

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommends the following evidence -based intervention: Car seat laws along with car seat distribution plus education programs.

The combination of these approaches increase restraint use and decrease injuries and deaths to child passengers.

The type of car seat needed depends on several factors, such as age, size, and developmental needs. Use your child's height and weight to pick the right safety seat. Each seat is different. Check the manufacturer instructions for exact height and weight limits:

- Infant seats are generally up to 20 pounds and rear facing.
- Toddler convertible seat are generally 20-40 pounds. Keep rear-facing as long as possible (check the guidance listed on the seat).
- Booster seats are generally 40-80 pounds and forward facing.

Resources

- [Car Seat Safety \(/car-seat-safety\)](#)
- [Child Passenger Safety: Get the Facts](#)
(https://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/child_passenger_safety/cps-factsheet.html)
- [Car Seats and Booster Seats](#) (<https://www.nhtsa.gov/equipment/car-seats-and-booster-seats>)

Impaired Driving

Every year in Massachusetts about 150 people die in motor vehicle crashes involving a driver who has been drinking alcohol and have a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.01 or higher. Four out of 5 (83%) of these fatalities involved drivers with a BAC of 0.08 or higher.

Massachusetts Impaired Driving Laws

In Massachusetts it is illegal to operate a motor vehicle with .08 (or over) Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC). [The law](#)

(<https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXIV/Chapter90/Section24>) also states that driving while under the influence of marijuana, narcotic drugs, depressants or stimulant substances is prohibited.

Prevention/Best Practices

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommends the following evidence-based interventions:

- Sobriety checkpoints allow police to briefly stop vehicles at specific, highly visible locations to see if the driver is impaired. Police may stop all or a certain portion of drivers.
- Breath tests may be given if police have a reason to suspect the driver is intoxicated
- Ignition interlocks installed in cars measure alcohol on the driver's breath. Interlocks keep the car from starting if the driver has a BAC above a certain level, usually 0.02%.

In Massachusetts they are used for people convicted of drunk driving for a second time and are highly effective at preventing repeat offenses while installed.

Impaired driving resources

- [Traffic Safety Initiatives Impaired Driving](/service-details/impaired-driving) (/service-details/impaired-driving)
- [Alcohol and Drug Suspensions](/alcohol-and-drug-suspensions) (/alcohol-and-drug-suspensions)
- [Highway Safety Plan](https://www.nhtsa.gov/sites/nhtsa.dot.gov/files/documents/ma_fy17hsp.pdf) (https://www.nhtsa.gov/sites/nhtsa.dot.gov/files/documents/ma_fy17hsp.pdf)

Distracted Driving

According to the CDC there are three main types of distraction:

- Visual: taking your eyes off the road;
- Manual: taking your hands off the wheel; and
- Cognitive: taking your mind off of driving.

Texting while driving is especially dangerous because it combines all three types of distraction. The number of drivers who report using a cell phone behind the wheel has jumped 30 percent since 2013. Nearly half (49%) of drivers report recently talking on a hand-held cell phone while driving, and one in three (35%) sent a text or e-mail while driving. The Insurance Institute of Highway Safety performed a study that indicated that crash risk was 2-6 times greater when drivers were manipulating a cellphone compared with when they were not distracted. The same study showed that the crash risk of texting for drivers was significantly increased for driver age groups under 30 years old and drivers over 64.

Massachusetts Distracted Driving Law

Massachusetts Safe Driving Law came into effect in September 2010. The law bans sending, typing or reading electronic messages to or from handheld devices while operating a motor vehicle. This includes use of the internet and text messaging. The law

also bans all handheld use of electronics by junior operators while behind the wheel. Read the [entire summary of the Safe Driving Law on the Registry of Motor Vehicles website](http://www.massrmv.com/SafeDrivingLawSummary.aspx) (<http://www.massrmv.com/SafeDrivingLawSummary.aspx>).

Prevention/Best Practices

Many states are enacting laws—such as banning texting while driving, or using graduated driver licensing systems for teen drivers—to help raise awareness about the dangers of distracted driving and to help prevent it from occurring. However, the effectiveness of cell phone and texting laws on decreasing distracted driving-related crashes requires further study.

Resources

- [Traffic Safety Initiatives: Distracted Driving](/service-details/distracted-driving) (</service-details/distracted-driving>)
- [CDC: Distracted Driving](https://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/distracted_driving/index.html) (https://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/distracted_driving/index.html)
- [NHTSA: Distracted Driving](https://www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving/distracted-driving#nhtsa-action) (<https://www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving/distracted-driving#nhtsa-action>)
- [Insurance Institute for Highway Safety: Distracted Driving](http://www.iihs.org/iihs/topics/t/distracted-driving/topicoverview) (<http://www.iihs.org/iihs/topics/t/distracted-driving/topicoverview>)

Pedestrian and Bicycle

On average, 80 pedestrians and 10 bicyclists are killed in motor vehicle crashes in Massachusetts every year. In addition, there are about 4,000 nonfatal pedestrian injuries and 1,400 nonfatal bicyclist injuries treated in Massachusetts hospitals each year.

Massachusetts Bicycle and Pedestrian Laws

Massachusetts law says that a driver must yield to a pedestrian when the pedestrian is on the same half of the roadway or within 10 feet of the motorist. For the full text of the law go to [MGL c. 89 §11](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXIV/Chapter89/Section11) (<https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXIV/Chapter89/Section11>)

Massachusetts law requires any person 16 years old or younger who is riding a bicycle to

wear a helmet. For the full text of the law and other Bicycle regulations go to [MGL c. 85 ST1B](#) (<https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXIV/Chapter85/Section11B>)

Evidence-based Interventions/Best Practices

According to the CDC, wearing bicycle helmets reduce the risk of head and brain injuries in the event of a crash. All bicyclists, regardless of age, can help protect themselves by wearing properly fitted bicycle helmets every time they ride. It is important that a helmet be properly fitted. Bicycle helmet laws are effective for increasing helmet use and reducing crash-related injuries and deaths among children and adults.

Whenever possible:

- cross the street at a designated crosswalk or intersection;
- Increase your visibility at night by carrying a flashlight and wearing retro-reflective clothing;
- Avoid distractions such as electronic devices that take your attention off the road;
- and walk on the sidewalk, but if one is not available, walk on the shoulder and face traffic.

Resources

- [NHTSA: Pedestrian Safety](https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/pedestrian-safety) (<https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/pedestrian-safety>)
- [Federal Highway Administration: Pedestrian & Bicycle Safety](https://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/ped_bike/) (https://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/ped_bike/)
- [Massbike.org](http://www.massbike.org/) (<http://www.massbike.org/>)
- [Walkboston.org](https://walkboston.org/) (<https://walkboston.org/>)

Teen Drivers

Motor vehicle crashes are one of the leading causes of death among young drivers.

Fortunately, Massachusetts has seen a significant decline in injury rates among junior operators (ages 16-17) over the past decade. On average, two Massachusetts drivers ages 16-17 die in a motor vehicle crash each year, and there are about 25 hospitalizations and 860 emergency department visits of drivers ages 16-17 for nonfatal crash injuries annually. Due in part to the decreasing crash injury rate among drivers ages 16-17 and the increasing number of youth getting their license at age 18 or older, Massachusetts drivers ages 18-20 now have higher hospitalization rates for crash related injuries than drivers ages 16-17.

Massachusetts Junior Operator License Laws

Junior Operator Laws (JOL), also known as Graduated Driver License Laws (GDL), are a system of regulations designed to keep new teen drivers safe by giving them more driving privileges the more experience they get behind the wheel.

- The Passenger Restriction prevents a Junior Operator from carrying passengers under the age of 18 (except for siblings) during the first six months that the driver has his/her license. This restriction was designed to reduce the number of distractions that an inexperienced driver may face while driving.
- The Night Restriction prevents a Junior Operator from driving between 12:30 am and 5:00 am, unless accompanied by a parent or guardian. This restriction was designed to prevent driving during these dangerous hours when more crashes tend to occur due to drowsiness or increased risk taking behavior.
- Operators under the age of 18 cannot use any mobile electronic device for any reason while operating a motor vehicle. The only exception is for reporting an emergency.

Prevention/Best Practices

Seat Belts: According to the CDC, of the teens (aged 16-19) that died in passenger vehicle crashes in 2016 at least 48% were not wearing a seat belt at the time of the crash.

Research shows that seat belts reduce serious crash-related injuries and deaths by about half.

Not Drinking & Driving: Enforcing minimum legal drinking age laws and zero blood-alcohol tolerance laws for drivers under age 21 are recommended.

Graduated Driver Licensing Programs (GDL): (Note: In Massachusetts these provisions are called the Junior Operator Law or JOL) Driving is a complex skill, one that must be practiced to be learned well. Teenagers' lack of driving experience, together with risk-taking behavior, puts them at heightened risk for crashes. The need for skill-building and driving supervision for new drivers is the basis for graduated driver licensing programs, which exist in all US states and Washington, DC. GDL provides longer practice periods, limits driving under high risk conditions for newly licensed drivers, and requires greater participation of parents as their teens learn to drive. Research suggests that the more comprehensive GDL programs are associated with reductions of 26% to 41% in fatal crashes and reductions of 16% to 22% in overall crashes, among 16-year-old drivers. When parents know their state's GDL laws, they can help enforce the laws and, in effect, help keep their teen drivers safe.

Resources

- [Session Law \(Acts 2006\) Chapter428](https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2006/Chapter428)
(<https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2006/Chapter428>)
- [Traffic Safety Initiatives: Teen Drivers](/service-details/teen-drivers) (/service-details/teen-drivers)
- [NHTSA: Teen Driving](https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/teen-driving) (<https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/teen-driving>)

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