Fact: The number one killer of children is not cancer or heart disease, but injuries, a high percentage of which are sustained in motor vehicles.

Fact: Teen drivers represent just 6 percent of the population in Suffolk County but account for 12 percent of motor vehicle fatalities.

Fact: Between 2004 and 2006, 15- to 19-year-olds in Suffolk County had the highest crash rate per 1,000 in all of New York.

Another fact is that almost all of these injuries and fatalities can be avoided. That’s the focus of the outreach and prevention program that Stony Brook University Medical Center has spearheaded in conjunction with other key community groups, including Suffolk County Safe Kids and the Suffolk County Regional Trauma Advisory Committee. According to Thomas K. Lee, MD, Chief of Pediatric Surgery at Stony Brook University Medical Center, three proven strategies promote safe driving among teens: graduated licensing laws; enforcement by area law enforcement agencies and schools; and parental controls. It is this last that Dr. Lee believes can make a significant difference. “We do so much to keep infants and children safe, but when a child turns 16, we hand them the keys to the car after only about 20 hours of driving training! Further, the part of their brain that can evaluate consequences and risks will not be fully developed until age 25. It is a recipe for potential disaster. Parents need to get more involved in the decision making around teens and driving.”

Dr. Lee and Jane McCormack, RN, Trauma Nurse Coordinator at Stony Brook, have developed a program aimed at educating parents about specific risks. “Parents tend to worry about driving and alcohol and that message has been effective; what they may not think about are speed-related crashes, or the fact that each passenger in the car with a teen driver increases the risk of a crash. It is estimated that 100 lives a year would be saved if teens drove alone,” says Ms. McCormack.

Advice for Parents

Here are recommendations from Dr. Lee and Ms. McCormack:

• Limit distractions. Do not allow cell phones or text messaging while driving. Don’t ask your teen to call you “on the way home.” Restrict the use of a GPS. If your teen does not know where he or she is going, he or she shouldn’t be driving.

• Restrict the number of passengers in a car driven by a teen driver. Passengers are the biggest distraction for new drivers.

• Be involved in the decision to drive. Don’t provide a vehicle to your teen until he or she has several months experience. Parents should evaluate on a case-by-case basis if using the car is appropriate for a new driver. Teens should have to “ask” to use the car.

• Require your teen (and all passengers) to wear seatbelts at all times. Seatbelts should be used in the back seat as well as in the front.

• Talk with other parents and support each other. Agree that you will call them if their teen is not wearing a seatbelt if they will do the same.

• Consider the use of a written contract for your teen driver. Such a contract spells out the rules and the consequences. For a copy of a contract, call Jane McCormack at (631) 444-3116.

Want More Information?
The parental education program runs for about 45 minutes and has been presented at a number of venues from libraries, houses of worship, and schools to workplaces. It may soon be available at pediatric physician offices as well. If you are interested in having a presentation at your organization, we are happy to arrange it. Simply call (631) 444-4000.

Before handing over the keys, young drivers should have sufficient experience and be educated about safe driving.