On May 26, 2005, Gillian "Jill" Sabet—an outgoing seventeen-year-old from San Clemente, California—jumped into an SUV with five friends to go to their junior prom. Amid the cheerful commotion in the car, the driver took her eyes off the road and her hands off the wheel for a split second to find a pack of gum. That's all it took to lose control of the vehicle—sending it flipping through the air. Jill—who would have been crowned prom queen that...
night—suffered massive injuries and died en route to the hospital. Her boyfriend, Jonathan, also a passenger, died as well.

Fiddling with your cell phone or putting on makeup while behind the wheel may not seem like a big deal. But the truth is, in-car distractions are just as dangerous as drinking and driving. In fact, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimates that momentary driver inattention contributes to an alarming 80 percent of car crashes in the United States each year. "Things on the road can change in an instant, so expect the unexpected," warns Stephen Wallace, chairman and CEO of Students Against Destructive Decisions. Maximize your street smarts with these tips.

#1 Buckle Up
Sadly, the simplest, most effective car-safety strategy—the seat belt—is still shunned by many teens, says Beverly Dearing, R.N., of the R. Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center at the University of Maryland in Baltimore. The NHTSA reported that a staggering 62 percent of teen passengers and drivers killed in car crashes in 2005 were not wearing one. "If you're in a crash," Dearing says, "having a seat belt on can mean the difference between walking away with a few cuts and being ejected from the car."

#2 Curb Cell-Phone Use
A recent survey headed by the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia found that 90 percent of teens have witnessed peers driving while talking on cell phones, and more than half saw drivers sending text messages or using handheld games—a frightening fact, given the American Pediatric Association's finding that the use of cell phones (both handheld and hands-free models) can increase crash rates by fourfold. Just last summer, five teen girls from New York were killed in a car accident that police officials say was likely caused by texting. "If you have to use your phone," advises Wallace, "pull over to a safe area and turn off the car first."

#3 Eat Elsewhere
For today's on-the-go teens, the car often becomes an impromptu lunch spot. But eating or drinking while driving prevents you from keeping both hands on the wheel, making you less capable of reacting swiftly to street hazards. Wait until you get to your destination to eat and drink.

#4 Plan Your Playlist
"My iPod is a huge distraction," admits eighteen-year-old Kelly, from Mill Valley, California. "I'll try to change the song while driving, which makes it impossible to concentrate on the road." A study conducted by researchers at Drexel University in Philadelphia found that using an iPod puts drivers at a higher risk of veering out of their traffic lane than cell-phone use. Preset your playlist before leaving home. Or if a friend is riding in the passenger seat, "he or she should help the driver by being the one who changes the music—like a buddy system," suggests Donna Sabet (Jill's mom), who started a teen driver and passenger awareness program called JourneySafe.

#5 Stay Focused
Cruising around with friends is a favorite teen pastime. But whether you're chatting it up or singing along to Rihanna on the radio, make sure the extra noise doesn't distract you from driving. The statistics speak for themselves: According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds have a 40 percent higher risk of crashing when they have one friend in the car. They have almost four times the risk with three or more passengers along for the ride. —J.S.P.