Safety officials recommend 4 tips for using Uber

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Uber, a transportation network in hundreds of cities worldwide, allows users to download an app, connect with a driver near them and get a ride to their desired destination. For many college students, it has become an alternative to taxi services.

While many students rely on Uber for a ride home, other students have reported that they have encountered impostor Uber drivers, while other Uber users have reported being assaulted by their drivers.

On Oct. 16, a former Boston Uber driver was sentenced to 10-12 years in state prison on aggravated rape, kidnapping and assault and battery. The former driver, Alejandro Done, pleaded guilty to driving the female victim to a secluded location, trapping her in the car and strangling and sexually assaulting her last December, according to USA TODAY.

Last week, a post on the website SFist claimed that an Uber driver in San Francisco threatened to sexually assault and kill a passenger. Matt McKenna, Uber's head of communications, called the driver's behavior "absolutely unacceptable" and the driver's access to Uber has been permanently removed."

Last month, a 35-year-old man was arrested in Tallahassee, Fla. after posing as an Uber driver in August and attempting to abduct a Tallahassee Community College student. He has been charged with kidnapping with intent to commit a felony, according to the Tallahassee Democrat. Also last month, a man posing as an Uber driver in Fort Worth, Texas. "initiated inappropriate conversations" with Texas Christian University students, according to WFAA. Another incident was reported in Boston last month, when a Simmons College student and her friend were approached by a man claiming to be an Uber driver. However, when they checked the car's license plate and found that it did not match the information they had been given in the app, they refused to get in the car.

However, even though several students have reported instances involving Uber, there are some precautions that Uber passengers can take to get home safely.

1. VERIFY THE IDENTITY OF THE DRIVER AND THEIR CAR BEFORE YOU GET IN

The Uber app provides riders with their driver's first name, photo, license plate number and a picture of the vehicle and their driver's rating. This information is intended to prevent riders from getting in a car with a fake driver.

"We encourage them to use all this information to verify the car and the driver before getting in," Uber spokesperson Kayla Whaling tells USA TODAY College. "On the flip side, the driver also verifies the account holder by making sure it is the correct person."

Whaling says drivers are supposed to address the rider by name to further verify their identity. Also, the only way to request an official Uber driver is through the app. Street hails are not allowed on the platform.

Matthew Feeney is a policy analyst with the Cato Institute who has researched the safety of services such as Uber. He wrote a report that was published in January that evaluated the safety of these services for both riders and drivers.

Feeney tells USA TODAY College that Uber has made sufficient efforts to inform riders about how to verify their driver's identity so they do not get into the wrong car.

"Uber, at least in my experience, does a pretty good job of asking passengers to make sure they get in with the right person," Feeney says.

This is an extra step passengers may not have to take when using a taxi, but it is worth the time.

Dave Sutton is a spokesperson for Who's Driving You, an initiative of the Taxicab, Limousine & Paratransit Association that seeks to raise awareness about the risks of services like Uber. Sutton tells USA TODAY College that "students need to be very careful and make certain that the car they're getting in is the actual vehicle that they ordered."

"Most taxis have obvious external markings, but Uber vehicles do not," he says.

2. WAIT INSIDE FOR YOUR RIDE TO COME

Another precaution built in to the app is notification of the driver's arrival, Whaling says. Riders will receive a message when their driver has arrived, so they do not need to wait in a potentially unsafe area before their driver comes.

"They don't have to go to a dark street corner and wait for their car," she says. "They can actually be inside — be it a house or a restaurant."

3. KEEP IN TOUCH WITH FRIENDS OR FAMILY

While the app gives riders the information they need to verify their driver's identity, riders are also able to notify their own contacts about their whereabouts in case of emergency.

"A rider can share their trip details, including the estimated time of arrival and specific route," Whaling says. "A family member or a friend who received the link from the rider can actually see the car moving along the distance, and they can see when that person arrives."

4. TAKE NOTE OF THE DRIVER'S RATING ON THE APP

Another feature of the app is a rating system that allows riders and drivers to rate each other. Feeney says this system discourages any problem behaviors.

"The rating system encourages good behavior on both the passenger and the driver, because the driver rates the passenger and the passenger rates the driver," he says. "Both parties have good reason to behave themselves."

Whaling says that Uber's safety team looks at rating information and is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to answer questions and address concerns.