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OCCUPANT PROTECTION (SEAT BELTS and CHILD SAFETY SEATS)

Commonly Asked Questions

I am short and the shoulder belt rubs against my neck. What can I do?

- Slight adjustments in one's seating position can often relieve uncomfortable rubbing. If this doesn't work, check with the car manufacturer for other options. Don't use products that interfere with the design of the seat belt.

Are air bags safe?

- Yes, air bags are designed to provide supplemental protection for belted occupants. However, air bags are very dangerous to children riding in rear-facing car safety seats (see additional information below).
- Air bags do not replace seat belts.
- Read the vehicle owner's manual about air bags.

What is the safest way for a child to ride in a vehicle with a passenger side air bag?

- Never place a rear-facing infant seat in the front seat of a car equipped with an air bag.
- Children 12 and under should always ride in the rear seat.
- Older children in the front seat must be careful if there is an airbag - always buckle up the right way with a lap and shoulder belt and move the seat all the way back away from the dashboard.
- Make sure all children are buckled up no matter where they sit. Unbuckled children can be hurt or killed by an air bag.

What is the correct way to wear a seat belt?

- Lap Belt
 - It should lie low across the hips and over the upper thigh.
 - It should not lie across the abdomen.
 - It should be adjusted so that it is snug.
- Shoulder Belt
 - It should lie across the chest and over the collarbone with minimal, if any, slack.
 - It should not lie across the neck or face.
 - Do not place the shoulder belt behind the back. This increases the crash's force on the lap portion of the belt and allows the head and/or chest to strike the steering wheel, dashboard or another seat in the vehicle.
 - Do not wear the shoulder belt under the arm because it places the belt over the



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ribs which are not strong enough to withstand the forces of a crash. Broken ribs could cause serious internal injuries.

How do I get others to buckle up?

- Talk about the law. Minnesota law requires that everybody in every seating position in the vehicle be buckled up or riding in an approved child passenger safety restraint. Law enforcement officers can stop and cite drivers and passengers who are not buckled up. This primary enforcement provision gives the seat belt use law the same status as every other Minnesota traffic safety law.
- Present the facts. If you're armed with information about the proven benefits of seat belts, you may be able to convince someone that buckling up is a smart thing to do. Remind non-users that any unrestrained occupant can be thrown into another occupant.
- Talk dollars and common sense. Motor vehicle crashes cost money. They cost families, employers and taxpayers millions of dollars every year.
- Take control. Lay down the rules. Remind a non-user that seat belt use is the law in Minnesota. Require seat belt use in your vehicle. Refuse to start the car until everyone in the vehicle is buckled up.
- Show you care. Ask non-users to buckle up because you care about their safety.

When can my child begin using the vehicle seat belt?

- A child who is both under age 8 and shorter than 4 feet 9 inches is required to be fastened in a child safety seat that meets federal safety standards. Under this law, a child cannot use a seat belt alone until they are age 8, or 4 feet 9 inches tall.
- A child is required by law to stay in an approved child safety seat or booster seat until that child fits the adult seat belt and the vehicle seat properly. A properly fitting seat belt means that the lap belt stays low and snug on the hips, the shoulder belt stays across the chest and collar bone, and the child sits up with back against the vehicle seat and knees bend at the edge of the seat cushion.
- Booster seats are car seats for children who have outgrown a car seat with a harness and are still too small to fit the adult seat belt. Boosters make seat belts fit correctly. There are two types of boosters: a high-back and no-back. Boosters must be used with a lap and shoulder belt.
- Booster seats with a small plastic shield in front of the child are NOT recommended. Shield boosters *do not* pass current federal standards for children over 40 pounds. Children under 40 pounds should ride in a forward-facing convertible seat or a forward-facing-only seat with a harness.
- Never use a booster with only a lap belt.



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I don't feel comfortable using just my lap belt. Can I install a shoulder belt in my vehicle?

- In most cases, the belt system can be replaced at the dealership. Many manufacturers also have shoulder belt kits that can be installed after a vehicle was purchased.
- Some vehicles have the lap/shoulder belt attached to the vehicle door and cannot safely secure a child in a child safety seat. Although it is recommended that children always ride in the back seat, several manufacturers will install a supplemental lap belt to use with a child safety seat. Many manufacturers have toll-free telephone numbers set up specifically to answer questions about retrofitting seat belts.

What happens in a crash?

- The Vehicle's Collision: This is what happens at the point of impact, whether it comes from the front, behind, or on the side. The vehicle begins stopping as it collides with an object such as another vehicle, wall or tree.
- The Human Collision: At the point of impact, whether driving or simply riding, you're still moving at the same speed as the car. If you are unbelted, whatever is in front of you (steering wheel, windshield, front seat, or another person) will stop you from moving. The human collision causes injury.
- The Human Body's Internal Collision: Even after you come to a complete stop, your internal organs are still moving forward. Suddenly, these organs collide with other organs. The internal collision may cause considerable and potentially fatal injury.

How does a seat belt work?

- Spreads forces over a wide area of the body
- Restrains body at the strongest points
- Slows body down gradually
- Helps protect the head and spinal cord
- The seat belt holds you in place while the car crushes and slows down. This means that our head, face and chest are less likely to strike the steering wheel, windshield, dashboard or the car's interior frame. You and other occupants wearing seat belts are not thrown into another person or ejected from the vehicle. Finally, if you are the driver, the safety belt helps you maintain control of the vehicle by keeping you conscious and in the driver's seat. This increases the chance of preventing a second crash.

Which child safety seat is the safest?

- The safest child safety seat is the one that fits in your vehicle, is the right size for your child and is used correctly every time. All safety seats manufactured in the U.S. must



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comply with the same strict safety standards.

NOTE: The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that all infants and toddlers should ride in a **Rear-Facing Car Safety Seat** until they are two (2) years of age or until they reach the highest weight or height allowed by their car safety seat's manufacturer.

Should I use my child safety seat if it was involved in a crash?

- A child safety seat that has been in a crash may have sustained structural damage that is not easily visible. Seats involved in a crash should be replaced. Auto insurance may cover the cost of a new child car seat.

Is it safe to use a second-hand car seat?

- It is best to use a new car seat. That is the only guarantee you have a safe seat. However, if considering a second-hand seat, it is important to get a full history of the seat from the previous owner(s). Has the seat been involved in a crash? Has a recall been issued for the seat? Is the seat too old (more than 6 years)? Does the seat have all the necessary parts?

How do I know if my child's safety seat has been recalled?

- To determine if a safety seat has been recalled, contact the manufacturer or the Auto Safety Hotline (1-888-327-4236). Before contacting them, look up the model number, the manufacturer of the seat and the date of manufacture. To be notified of a recall immediately, register ownership of the seat with the manufacturer.

How do I know if I'm using my child's safety seat correctly?

- Safety seats are not as simple as they look to install and use. Always read the car seat manufacturer's instruction manual and the vehicle owner's manual to ensure correct use of your safety seat.

Can a child under 40 pounds use a booster seat?

- It is not recommended. A convertible car seat or a forward-facing-only seat with a harness is the safest way to ride. However, if a child is tall enough that his or her ears are higher than the top of the convertible seat, and weighs less than 40 pounds, use a booster seat.



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Are there seats available for low-birth weight babies or children with special needs?

- Yes there are. No child should ride unrestrained. There are many different restraint systems available for children who do not fit in conventional car seats. Never attempt to adapt a child's safety seat. These seats are designed to meet safety standards, and any deviation from the design may not provide adequate protection or may even cause serious injury.

Misconceptions and Myths

It's safer to be thrown out of a vehicle in case of a crash than to be stuck in the car with the seat belt securely fastened.

- It's safer to be buckled in than to be thrown from your vehicle. The chances of being killed are four times greater if you are thrown out of the car than if you are held in by a seat belt. Another vehicle can hit you, you can hit another moving object, your own vehicle can harm you or you may not make it fully out of your vehicle.

I don't need to buckle up because I am strong enough to brace myself in the event of a crash.

- In case of a crash, being buckled up can prevent you from hitting objects or other people inside of the car. At 35 mph, an unbelted passenger weighing 180 lbs can crash into the steering wheel, the dashboard, the windshield, or even onto the pavement with a force equal to falling from a three story building.

I'm pregnant and I can't wear a seat belt. It might cause a miscarriage or crush the baby.

- There is no evidence that wearing a seat belt increases the chance of injury to an unborn child. In fact, in a crash, the lap/shoulder belt will prevent the driver and other occupants from being thrown from the vehicle or from striking the hard interior areas inside the car. Pregnant women should wear the lap portion of the belt under the stomach as low as possible on the hips, and, if riding in front, the vehicle seat should be moved as far back as possible.

I'm a good driver. I've never gotten into a crash and I've never worn a seat belt; I don't need to wear one.

- You may be a good driver but you need to look out for the drivers around you who may not be as careful as you.



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I wear my seat belt some of the time. There's no need to wear a seat belt on roads that I know or if I'm close to home.

- Statistically speaking, part-time seat belt users are more likely to be involved in a traffic crash in those situations in which they do most of their driving - this means that last-minute trip to the local video store or picking up a child at school. A large percent of serious and fatal injuries occur less than 25 miles from home.

I don't wear my seat belt because it causes serious injuries.

- There is little evidence to suggest that properly worn and fitting safety belts generate life threatening injuries, but much evidence to suggest that they greatly decrease injuries.

Whether I wear a safety belt is my choice - it doesn't affect anyone else.

- When someone is injured or dies in a traffic crash, we all pay. These costs, which include emergency services, hospital services and survivor payments, are paid for by all taxpayers and insurance policyholders. Increasing seat belt use is one of the most cost effective ways to reduce traffic fatalities.
- Any unrestrained occupant in a vehicle puts all other occupants at risk of injury. In motor vehicle crashes, unrestrained occupants can strike other occupants with great force.

Acknowledgments:

[Minnesota Department of Public Safety](#)

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration



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