

5

minute safety talk



Safety Belts — Friends for Life

Everyone wants to live a long life. Many people worry about their weight, cholesterol, and blood pressure. But don't forget that simply driving to work could be hazardous to your health.

Motor vehicle crashes are the sixth leading cause of death today. In 2004, approximately 46,200 people died in motor vehicle accidents. Another 2.4 million suffered disabling injuries (*Injury Facts 2005-2006*).

You can protect yourself by wearing your lap-and-shoulder safety belt. A shoulder belt helps keep your head and chest from striking the steering wheel, dashboard and windshield during a crash. The lap belt keeps you from being thrown forward.

For added protection, buy a car equipped with air bags. They're available in most recent models, and tests have shown them to be reliable. The bags are hidden in the steering wheel hub and in the right side of the instrument panel. Side curtain air bags are also found in many large passenger vehicles. Air bags and safety belts together offer the best protection from injury in vehicle crashes.

Wearing it correctly is the key

If you wear the lap belt too loose or too high around your waist, you can defeat its lifesaving effectiveness. The lap belt portion should be snug and low across your hips.

The shoulder belt fits properly when the webbing fits over your shoulder, across your collarbone and diagonally across your chest. Do not wear the shoulder belt under your arm.

A common mistake is to wear the shoulder belt without the lap belt. You could be thrown forward and slip under the shoulder belt. That might lead to a broken collarbone or leg — or even strangulation. Or it could result in ejection and death.

If all motor vehicle occupants wear safety belts properly, thousands of lives could be saved each year. Yet many drivers fail to buckle up, possibly because of these misconceptions:

MYTH: Safety belts are needed only for long trips and high-speed expressway driving.

FACT: Eighty percent of serious and fatal injuries occur in cars traveling under 40 mph. Fatalities involving non-belted occupants have been recorded at as low as 12 mph. Conversely, there were no fatalities to belted occupants in a 28,000-vehicle study with speeds up to 60 mph. Seventy-five percent of serious and fatal injuries occur fewer than 25 miles from home.

MYTH: Safety belts trap occupants in their vehicles, especially in cases of fire or submersion.

FACT: Less than half of 1 percent of all injury-producing collisions involve fire or submersion. But even if fire or submersion does occur, wearing a safety belt can save a life. An unrestrained occupant could be slammed into the dashboard or windshield and knocked unconscious, and would be unable to extricate himself. Also, an unrestrained occupant rendered unconscious could block exit paths of other occupants.

MYTH: It is better to be thrown clear of the vehicle.

FACT: A person is about 25 times more likely to be fatally injured if ejected from the vehicle than if inside and buckled up. Ejection can result not only in landing on unforgiving pavement but also in hitting other lethal roadside objects, scraping along the ground or being crushed by one's own or another vehicle.

MYTH: Occupants can brace themselves adequately in a crash.

FACT: The forces involved in even a low-speed crash make it impossible to avoid contact with the vehicle interior and other passengers, which ultimately results in injury. At the moderate speed of 30 mph, a collision would throw occupants forward with a force equal to 30 times their body weight. Also, one out of four serious in-vehicle injuries are caused by occupants being thrown against each other.

MYTH: Good drivers do not cause crashes.

FACT: First, the primary purpose of the safety belt is to protect against injury after the crash, and good drivers are equally vulnerable. Second, even the best driver can't control other drivers: consider that 39 percent of all fatal car crashes involve a drunk driver. Third, safety belts can make good drivers better drivers. A belted driver will avoid fatigue and have more control over the vehicle in emergencies. The belt will help keep the driver where he or she belongs — behind the wheel. Finally, even good drivers can make sudden stops. In such situations, occupants wearing seat belts are protected against contact with the vehicle interior or with other occupants.

MYTH: Safety belts do not work. They hang loose or do not lock up when pulled.

FACT: Most vehicles are equipped with a one-piece lap-and-shoulder belt that has been designed to allow freedom of movement as needed. This engineering advance answers the argument that belts are confining and do not allow for easy access to vehicle instruments. When needed, an inertial device locks the safety belt in place and keeps the occupants from making contact with the vehicle interior or being ejected.

MYTH: Pregnant women should not wear safety belts.

FACT: Despite the possibility of a belt-caused injury, a pregnant woman is much safer using a safety belt in the event of a serious collision, according to the American Medical Association. A pregnant woman should set the belt low, so that it pulls in a downward direction against the pelvic bones. The belt should not pull back against the abdominal bulge. The lap belt should be worn snug, but not tight. The pregnant woman should sit up straight, since slouching can cause the belt to ride up on the abdomen.

The best practice is to wear a safety belt every time you are in a motor vehicle. Collisions happen, but you can increase your chance of walking away without injury if you buckle up.