



Seat Belt Usage

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Background

More than 90 percent of Americans age 16 and above drive a motor vehicle; of those, nearly 80 percent claim to wear their seat belts at all times while driving. These figures come from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), which also estimates that seat belts saved more than 135,000 lives between 1975 and 2001. While many people wear their seat belts because they recognize the safety factor, others wear them because failure to do so can result in a fine. Regardless of the reason one wears a seat belt, the fact is that since the 1950s they have been proven to save lives.

However, many people refuse to wear seat belts. They say that the belts are too uncomfortable, or they say they are only driving a short distance. They may also say that they simply forget. With the growing prevalence of state "primary laws," in which police officers are allowed to stop cars at random to perform seat-belt checks, people are clearly more careful when they know they may be facing a fine.

The first seat belts were not installed in cars by auto manufacturers. Early automobiles did not go particularly fast, and there were relatively few cars on the road. As the number of motor vehicles increased, so did the amount of danger. In the 1930s, a number of physicians, seeing the results of traffic accidents, lobbied car makers to create some sort of restraining device to keep people from being thrown from a car in an accident. Several doctors actually designed their own lap belts and installed them in their autos.

It was not until the 1950s that seat belts began to appear with some regularity. In 1954 the Sports Car Club of America began to require drivers to wear lap belts as they raced. Soon afterward such groups as the National Safety Council (NSC), American College of Surgeons, and International Association of Chiefs of Police issued their own recommendations for the manufacture and installation of seat belts. The Swedish auto manufacturer Volvo began marketing lap belt in 1956; that same year both Ford and Chrysler decided to offer lap belts as well. Seat belts were not required by law, though, in the United States until 1968.

Types of Seat Belts

The simple belt that was pulled across the lap (and that only came on the front seats) has long since been retired. That belt was known as *two-point* because of its simple A-to-B design. Today's seat belts are *three-point*; one strap goes across the lap while another goes over the shoulder and diagonally across the

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chest. In some automobiles, the two straps are connected and the occupant crosses it over the chest and the lap in one motion. In other cars, the occupant connects the lap belt while the shoulder belt slides into place automatically once the door is closed. A prototype for a *four-point* is being developed; it works more like a harness than a typical seat belt would.

Seat belts are made of lightweight but durable fabric that is designed to withstand impacts and hold the wearer in place. Of the roughly 40,000 automobile deaths that occur each year, safety experts say nearly half could have been prevented if a seat belt was being worn. In many cases, the person is killed as a result of being thrown from the vehicle upon crashing. In addition to being durable, seat belts are also designed to be much more comfortable than they were in the past. Most seat belts today employ a mechanism that allows the wearer to move fairly comfortably while driving; if the car comes to a sudden stop the belt locks and holds the wearer firmly in place.

Legislation

Federal

There is no federal seat belt law; such laws are left to the individual states. The U. S. Department of Transportation, through NHTSA, offers grant programs to states; in 2002, 48 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico shared a \$44.4 million grant (Maine and Wyoming declined to take any grant money). Safety and public awareness campaigns are also conducted by NHTSA. Probably the best known is the series of print and broadcast advertisements that feature Vince and Larry, the crash test dummies.

In 1998, Congress passed the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), which includes grant money for states to initiate new seat belt laws, traffic enforcement programs, and child passenger protection and training activities.

State

Every state except New Hampshire has a seat belt requirement for adults. All 50 states and the District of Columbia have seat belt laws that cover children. These laws require children under a certain age (usually 3 or 4) to be placed in a child restraint (a baby seat, a booster seat, etc.); buckling these children up with adult belts is not permitted by law.

New York is one of the most active proponents of seat belt regulation. It was the first state to try to pass seat belt legislation when in 1959 it tried to mandate seat belts in all new cars sold in the state. In 1985, New York made seat belt use mandatory for back seat passengers aged 10 or older; in 1987 it became the first state to require seat belts on large school buses.

Primary versus Secondary Laws

Primary seat belt laws are one of the most effective enforcement tools available. A primary law allows police to stop an automobile and ticket the driver for not wearing a seat belt. Seventeen states and the District of Columbia have primary laws.

Secondary laws allow the police to ticket a driver who is not wearing a seat belt, but the police must have already stopped the driver for some other reason. A person who is speeding or who goes through a red light or whose tail light is out can be stopped and ticketed; a person who is obeying all the laws but is not wearing a seat belt will not be pulled over in a state with no primary law.

Proponents of primary legislation point out the safety factor. More people will wear seat belts if they know they run the risk of being pulled over and ticketed. If the driver of a car is wearing a seat belt, chances are his or her passengers are too. Moreover, according to information from the National Safety Council (NSC), adults who buckle up are more likely to make sure their children are properly buckled up. In fact, according to NSC, overall seat belt usage can be as much as 15 percent higher in states with primary laws.

Why People Ignore Seat Belts

Of the people who use seat belts, most say their reason for wearing them was to avoid injury. A study conducted in 1998 for NHTSA called the Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey (MVOSS) revealed that 97 percent of frequent seat belt users and 77 percent of occasional users wear their seat belts as a safety measure. Other reasons cited included wanting to set a good example, being with other people who are wearing seat belts, and force of habit. More than 80 percent of the respondents admitted they use them because doing so is required by law.

Regarding people who do not wear seat belts, some wear seat belts occasionally and others admit never wear seat belts. According to the MVOSS study, the primary reason occasional seat belt users fail to buckle up is that they are only driving short distances (56 percent). More than half said that they simply forget on occasion. For those who never wear a seat belt, the most commonly cited reason (65 percent) is that seat belts are uncomfortable. Other reasons people gave for not wearing their seat belts include the following:

- Being in a hurry and not having time to buckle up
- Light traffic on the roads when respondent drives
- Not wanting to get clothing wrinkled
- Resentment at being told what to do
- Knowing someone who died in a crash while wearing a seat belt
- Resentment at government interference in personal behavior
- Never having gotten used to seat belts
- The belief that with air bags, seat belts are redundant

Safety experts point out that many of these reasons are based on faulty logic. For example, light traffic may have nothing to do with having to make a sudden stop. Air bags, while a valuable safety precaution, are limited in how much they can do. Some overweight people claim that they cannot wear seat belts because the seat belts do not fit them. Some, but not all, auto manufacturers offer seat belt extenders to deal with this problem; others offer customized longer seat belts. The fact remains, however, that there are people who simply will not wear seat belts; they are more comfortable risking being ticketed or potential injury or death.

Seat Belts on School Buses

Smaller school buses are treated like passenger vehicles when it comes to seat belt requirements. Because of their small size they are more likely to eject passengers; as a result, they are equipped with seat belts as a matter of course. As for standard size school buses, the effectiveness of seat belts has been a source of debate for several years.

In 1992, five years after New York passed a law requiring seat belts on school buses, New Jersey passed a similar law. While New York's law makes use of the seat belts optional, New Jersey's law requires children to buckle up. In 1999, Florida, Louisiana, and California also enacted laws for what they called "improved occupant restraint systems" on large school buses, although they have not yet decided exactly what type of

restraint they wish to require on their buses.

It may seem odd that in an atmosphere of increased emphasis on safety there would be any question about seat belts on large buses. Yet opponents, citing data from NHTSA, have said that seat belts on buses might do little to help children. Rather, they believe, the improved interior design of school buses (known as compartmentalization) is more effective. Since the 1970s, school bus seats have been mandated by law to be well-padded on both sides, with high backs and extra-sturdy anchoring, and no exposed rivets. The design of the modern school bus has been compared to that of an egg carton; the extra padding around the seats helps protect the passengers during sudden impacts and keeps them from being ejected from their seats. Moreover, say opponents of school bus seat belts, in the event of an accident, it would be much harder for someone to get children out of a bus if they are all wearing seat belts. This issue will not be resolved easily. What both sides can agree on, however, is that school buses are definitely safer today than they were in the early 1970s.

Keeping Safe

The bottom line for drivers and automobile passengers is that in almost all cases it is wiser to buckle up. From a safety perspective, the [EVIDENCE](#) clearly points to the value of seat belts in saving lives. From a legal perspective, failure to wear a seat belt can mean being ticketed. Just as there are people who continue to smoke, no doubt there will be people who continue to avoid wearing seat belts. By getting into the habit of wearing them, say the safety experts, travelers will become more comfortable with seat belts, both as drivers and as passengers.

Additional Resources

Baby Seats, Safety Belts, and You. Breitenbach, Robert J., Janet B. Carnes, and Judy A. Hammond, U. S. Department of Transportation, 1995.

SAE Vehicle Occupant Restraint Systems and Components Standards Manual. Society of Automotive Engineers, 1995.

Standard Enforcement Saves Lives: The Case for Strong Seat Belt Laws. NHTSA, National Safety Council, 1999.

Organizations

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)

P. O. Box 541689

Dallas, TX 75354 USA

Phone: (800) 438-6233 (GET-MADD)

URL: <http://www.madd.org>

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