

Safety belts and airbags

Factsheet

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WEARING a safety belt increases your chance of surviving a crash by 40 percent.

In a crash, if you're in the front and you're not wearing a safety belt, you may be thrown into the windscreen or onto the road. In the back seat, you might be thrown onto the front seats, hit the roof, or smash your face into the back of the people sitting in front.

If everybody in New Zealand wore safety belts all the time, around 35 lives, 250-300 injuries and millions of dollars could be saved every year.

Choose a lap-and-diagonal safety belt

Whenever you've got a choice, choose a lap-and-diagonal safety belt over a lap belt. If a lap belt is your only option, adjust it to fit you. Lap belts must be worn low across the bone of the pelvis and tightened.

Who's responsible?

If you're the driver, the law says it's your responsibility to make sure that everyone under 15 years old is wearing a safety belt or sitting in an approved child restraint.

(However, the driver of a bus is not responsible for ensuring seatbelts are used, if fitted.)

Put children in approved child restraints

Safety belts are designed for adult bodies. Until a child can safely and comfortably wear an adult safety belt (ie, the belt crosses their pelvis, not their stomach), you have to put them in an approved child restraint. (See factsheet 7 *Child restraints* if you need more information.)

Some child restraints are designed so that they can be used safely with lap belts, and where this is the case, it's a safe option – check with the restraint manufacturer.

- Children under 7 years must be properly restrained in an approved child restraint.
- Children aged 7 years must use an appropriate child restraint if there's one available. If there isn't, the child must use a safety belt. If there's no safety belt available, the child must sit in the back seat.
- Children aged 8 to 14 years must use a safety belt if there's one available. If there's no safety belt, they must sit in the back seat.
- Drivers and passengers 15 years and over must wear a safety belt if there's one available.

Note: Safety belts are designed to hold one person. Never put a safety belt around two or more children, and never put a child on an adult's lap with the belt around them both.

Excuses – and why they aren't valid

Many people find excuses for not wearing a safety belt. None of the excuses below are valid.

Pregnancy

If you're pregnant, you must always wear your safety belt, with the lap belt worn low on the pelvis. Unborn children need to be protected from crash injuries. If you don't wear a safety belt you put two lives at risk.

Skilful driving

No matter how good a driver you are, you can't control what other drivers do. Be prepared and wear your safety belt.

Individual freedom

Some people think wearing a safety belt or not is their own business. It's not a matter of choice, it's the law.

Being thrown clear

Some people claim that without a safety belt they'd be thrown clear from their vehicle in a crash. They might – but they're likely to be killed or permanently disabled. You're more likely to survive in the car, with a safety belt on.

Being trapped

Some people believe that wearing a safety belt would trap them in the vehicle if they crashed. If the crash is so serious that you might be trapped, not wearing a safety belt would probably mean you're dead. When you're wearing a safety belt your chances of surviving are higher.

Protests from children

Some people claim that their children don't wear safety belts because they don't like them. However, wearing safety belts is a serious safety issue – it's the sort of decision that adults make, not children. Insist that your children wear their safety belts. It could save their lives.

Children who wear a restraint from birth will think it's normal to wear one.

The safety belt doesn't fit

If the safety belt won't fit around you, there are extenders available. Ask your nearest motor vehicle parts and accessories store for information.

What are the fines for not wearing a safety belt?

If you don't wear a safety belt, or you allow a person under 15 years to travel unrestrained, you can be fined \$150 for each belt not worn. The driver must pay for each unrestrained person under 15 years old. People 15 years and over are responsible for their own fine.

Safety belts don't last forever

The material safety belts are made from does wear out over time. It can also get damaged in a number of ways. A damaged or worn out safety belt might break, or stretch too much in a crash. Either way, it may not protect you. Common signs of damage or wear are:

- fading, from UV light
- fraying, from rubbing on fittings
- a cut in the material
- the belt is no longer flexible or supple.

The fittings on the safety belt can also be damaged. Replace the safety belt if its fittings get damaged.

Usually, when front seat safety belts fail warrant of fitness or certificate of fitness inspections, they have to be replaced with more modern webbing 'clamp' safety belts. Webbing 'clamp' safety belts hold drivers and passengers more firmly in place in a crash with a mechanism that clamps onto the belt material to prevent slippage. The locking mechanism on older style retractor belts can allow the belt to partly slip in a crash, increasing the likelihood that vehicle occupants will be injured by a collision with the steering wheel or dashboard.

Airbags

An airbag is designed to work with a safety belt, not replace it. In most vehicles the airbags will only inflate in a crash serious enough to threaten people even if they have safety belts on.

An airbag is a gas-filled cushion that inflates very rapidly out of the steering wheel hub or the dashboard in a frontal crash. It's designed to reduce injuries by preventing your head from hitting the steering-wheel, the top of the windscreen, or the dashboard.

Many vehicles have airbags for the driver and front seat passenger, and some also have additional airbags to protect the occupants in side impacts, and the driver's knees in frontal impacts.

Read the owner's manual to find out more about the airbags fitted to your vehicle.

Never put a child in a rear-facing child restraint in the front seat of a vehicle that has a passenger airbag. If the airbag activates, a child in a rear-facing restraint could be seriously injured.

Airbag injuries

You can be injured by an airbag. The injuries are normally minor, compared with the injuries you could receive in a crash if your car didn't have airbags.

If your car has airbags:

- make sure there is nothing between the airbag cover and you (eg, never attach toys, cup holders or anything else to the top of the airbag cover)
- sit as far back from the dashboard as possible (if you're the driver, obviously you have to make sure you can still reach all the controls safely)
- follow the instructions on the airbag warning labels in your vehicle.

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