Car Safety for Pregnant Women, Babies, and Children

*Car safety is important for both you and your **fetus**. During pregnancy, the best way to keep yourself and your fetus safe while riding in a car is to wear your seat belt. After your baby is born, strap him or her into a car seat and buckle your seat belt each time you ride in a car.*

This pamphlet explains

- *the importance of car safety*
- *car safety during pregnancy*
- *child passenger safety laws*
- *choosing, buying, and installing a car seat*
- *distracted driving*

The Importance of Car Safety

Seat belts and car seats save lives. Car crashes are a leading cause of death in the United States. Crashes killed more than 33,000 people and injured another 2 million people in 2012. More than one half of the people killed were not restrained properly.

Wearing a seat belt can save your life and your children's lives. Almost every state has laws that require seat belt use. It takes just a couple of seconds for an adult to buckle up. It takes only a short time longer to strap a baby into a car seat. Take the time to be safe whenever you and your baby ride in a car.

What Happens in a Car Crash

Think about falling from a three-story building and hitting the ground. That is what the force of a crash at 30 miles per hour is like. A car crash has two collisions. The first happens when the car is hit or hits something and comes to a sudden stop. The second collision happens when passengers are thrown forward in the car until something stops them, such as the steering wheel, windshield, or dashboard. A seat belt worn the correct way stops the second collision from happening.

Car Safety During Pregnancy

Although the fetus is protected inside your body, you should wear a lap and shoulder belt every time you travel while you are pregnant for the best protection—even in the final weeks of pregnancy. You and your fetus are much more likely to survive a car crash if you are buckled in.

Wearing a Seat Belt

As your belly grows during pregnancy, it is important to make sure that you wear your seat belt correctly. When wearing a seat belt, follow these rules:

- Buckle the lap belt below your belly so that it fits snugly across your hips and pelvic bone.
- Place the shoulder belt across your chest (between your breasts) and over the mid-portion of your collar bone (away from your neck).
- Never place the shoulder belt under your arm or behind your back.
- Pull any slack (looseness) out of the belt.
- If you are in an accident, seek medical attention right away, even if you are not injured.

Air Bag Safety

Air bags are now common in cars. They work best when used together with seat belts. Air bags help keep your head and upper body from hitting the inside of the car. Frontal air bags are inside the steering wheel and the dashboard in front of the passenger seat. Some cars also have side-impact air bags to protect against side crashes.

In a crash, air bags inflate very quickly—faster than the blink of an eye. The force of an air bag can hurt people who are too close to it. Follow these tips if your car has air bags:

- Keep 10 inches between the steering wheel and your breastbone.
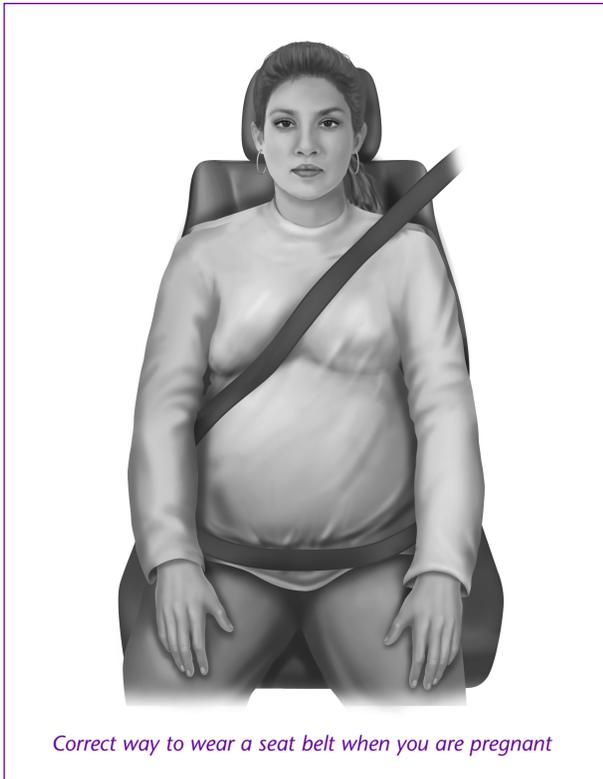
Correct way to wear a seat belt when you are pregnant

- If the car has an air bag "on/off" switch, check to be sure it is turned to "on."
- As your belly grows, you may not be able to keep as much space between you and the steering wheel. If the car has a tilt steering wheel, make sure it is angled toward your breastbone, not your belly or head.

Child Passenger Safety Laws

All 50 states have laws requiring the use of child safety seats for infants and children at different ages. In 48 states, there are laws requiring the use of booster seats for children who have outgrown their safety seats. Go to http://www.ghsa.org/html/stateinfo/laws/childsafety_laws.html to find out the laws for your state. In most states, you can be stopped for a child seat violation as the only reason.

Child safety experts recommend the use of safety seats and booster seats for children of specific ages and weights. Many state laws are based on these recommendations. These recommendations are detailed in the following sections.

Choosing a Car Seat

You cannot take your newborn home from the hospital without a car seat. Plan to have the car seat at least 3 weeks before your due date so you will have time to install it correctly and learn how to buckle the baby in safely.

There are three types of car seats used for newborns and children up to age 12 years: 1) the rear-facing car seat, 2) the forward-facing car seat, and 3) the booster seat. All three should be used in the back seat of the car—never in the front seat. Air bags in the front seat can cause serious injury to children. Until they reach age 13 years, children should always ride in the back seat.

Infants and Toddlers—Rear-Facing Car Seat

Infants and toddlers should ride in a rear-facing car seat until they are 2 years of age or until they reach the highest weight and height allowed by their car seat's maker. In a rear-facing car seat, the baby is turned to face the back windshield of the car. The seat has a harness that will cradle and move with your child in a crash to reduce the stress to the child's fragile neck and spinal cord.

There are different types of rear-facing car seats. "Infant-only seats" are portable and can be used only as rear-facing seats. They are best for babies up to 12 months of age. "Convertible" and "3-in-1" car seats usually have higher height and weight limits and also can be used as front-facing seats as your child grows.

Toddlers and Preschoolers—Forward-Facing Car Seat

Toddlers and preschoolers who have outgrown the height and weight limit of the rear-facing seat should use a forward-facing seat. A forward-facing car seat faces the front windshield of the car. It has a harness

Table 1. Car Safety Seats by Age

Infants and Toddlers

Infants and toddlers (including premature infants) up to age 2 years or until child reaches the height and weight limit allowed by the car seat maker

Rear-Facing Seat

Models available include:

- Infant-only seats for babies up to 12 months of age
- Convertible and 3-in-1 car seats that can be used as front-facing seats as your child grows

Toddlers and Preschoolers

Toddlers and preschoolers aged 2 years until child reaches the top height or weight limit allowed by the car seat maker (usually 40–80 pounds)

Forward-Facing Seat

You can use a seat that is made to be forward-facing only or use a convertible seat or 3-in-1 seat that is turned forward.

School-Aged Children

School-aged children who have outgrown the forward-facing seat until the child reaches 8–12 years and is at least 4 feet 9 inches in height

Booster Seat

Children should use a booster seat until the adult seat belts fit correctly.

Older Children

Older children who have outgrown the booster seat until age 13 years

Back Seat With Seat Belt

Children up to age 13 years should always ride in the back seat.

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and uses a tether to limit your child's forward movement during a crash. Keep your child in a forward-facing seat for as long as possible until he or she reaches the top height or weight limit that is listed in the car seat instruction manual.

School-Aged Children—Booster Seat

Move your child to a booster seat when he or she outgrows the height or weight limit of the forward-facing seat. A booster seat raises and positions your child so that the vehicle's lap and shoulder belts fit properly.

It keeps the lap belt from causing injury to the child's abdomen and keeps the shoulder belt in place to give the child upper body protection. Your child should use a booster seat until the car seat belts fit properly. This usually occurs when the child is between the ages of 8 years and 12 years and is at least 4 feet 9 inches in height. Once they grow out of the booster seat, children can ride buckled in with the car's seat belts, but only in the back seat until they are aged 13 years.

Buying the Best Seat

The right car seat is one that fits your child and your car. Before you shop for a car seat, you should know something about how the seat will be installed. Newer cars and trucks have the LATCH system for installing car seats. LATCH stands for Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children. Instead of seat belts, special anchors hold the seat in place. If your car and car seat do not have the LATCH system, you will need to use seat belts to install the car seat.

Keep in mind that not all car seats fit in all cars. If you have a two-door car, small back seats, or deep bucket seats, it can make installing a car seat more difficult. A well-designed car seat that is easy to use is the best for you and your child. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration offers parents a five-star rating system on its web site (www.nhtsa.gov/nhtsa_eou/) based on how easy certain car seats are to use.

When buying a seat, keep these tips in mind:

- Know whether your car has the LATCH system.
- Try locking and unlocking the buckle while you are in the store. Try changing the lengths of the straps.
- Read the labels to find out the seat's height and weight limits.
- Do not buy a used car seat if you know it has been in a car crash. Also, used car seats may be missing parts or instructions. Do not buy a used car seat that looks old or worn or is missing labels with the model number and maker's name. Keep in mind that car seats have expiration dates. You can check the expiration date for any car seat on the maker's web site.

After you buy the seat, register it with the maker using the card that comes with the seat, or register it online with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration at https://www.nhtsa.gov/equipment/car-seats-and-booster-seats#registration. Registering your car seat allows you to get updates and recall notices.

Installing a Car Seat

Read the car seat instruction manual and your car's owner manual. You can take your car and the seat to a car seat inspection station (see box). These stations can check whether your car seat is installed correctly after you have installed it yourself.

If you are using the seat belts to secure the car seat, make sure that they can stay in the locked position. Most cars have seat belts that can stay locked. If your car

does not have these types of seat belts, you will need to use the locking clips that come with the car seat.

When installing the car seat, you will need to decide whether to place the seat in the middle of the back seat or in one of the side seats. Some experts think that placing the car seat in the middle is best. However, some cars do not have a middle seat or have a middle seat that is too narrow or uneven. Some LATCH systems do not work in the middle seat. The safest option is to place the car seat in the back seat location where it can be anchored tightly with the seat belt or LATCH system.

Lock the seat into its base if it has one. The base should not move more than 1 inch when pushed front to back or side to side. If you are using the seat belts, make sure the lap part of the belt is fastened tightly to the car seat frame.

Make sure the car seat's harness fits snugly around the baby. You should be able to slide one finger under the straps at your child's chest. The straps should be over your baby's shoulders. The chest clips should be placed at your baby's armpits.

Keep in mind that bulky clothing and blankets can stop the harness from fitting snugly. Always buckle the baby in first and then place covers or blankets over the harness.

If your baby leans to the side of the car seat or slouches down in the seat, you can add support by placing small, rolled-up blankets on each side of the baby's head and shoulders. Do not use a car seat insert unless it came with the car seat.

Distracted Driving

One big danger on the roads today is distracted driving. Distracted driving means doing something else while driving that takes your hands off the steering wheel or your eyes or mind off the road:

- Using a cell phone
- Texting
- Eating
- Feeding a child or picking up a toy
- Grooming
- Using a navigation system or changing a DVD

All distracted driving puts the driver, passengers, and bystanders in danger. Parents who are distracted while driving with children in the car are more likely to be in a crash. You also may be showing your children that distracted driving is OK. Many states have laws that ban texting while driving and using a cell phone without a hands-free device. Wait to send a text or make a call until your car is parked.

Finally…

It is important to protect yourself and your baby before and after birth by properly using seat belts and car seats every time you are in a moving vehicle. Taking just a few seconds to buckle up can save both of your lives.

Glossary

Fetus: The stage of human development beyond 8 completed weeks after fertilization.