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Seat Belts: Advice and Information

This fact sheet about seat belts gives advice and information on several issues:

- The Purpose of Seat Belts
- Seat Belt Facts and Figures
- Ensuring You Use a Seat Belt Correctly
- Damaged Seat Belts
- Pregnant Occupants and Seat Belts
- Lap Belts
- Seat Belt Adjustment
- Child Restraints

It is part of a range of fact sheets about seat belts, other titles are:

- "Seat Belts: History"
- "Seat Belts: Law"
- "Seat Belts: Technology"

The Purpose of Seat Belts:

Seat belts are designed to retain people in their seats, and so prevent or reduce injuries suffered in a crash. They ensure that as little contact is made between the occupant and vehicle interior as possible and significantly reduce the risk of being thrown from a vehicle.

On modern vehicles, seat belts are now also designed to work as the key part of wider injury prevention measures and safety systems, such as airbags and head restraints, which will not be as effective in reducing the risk of injury if an occupant is not wearing a seat belt.

ALWAYS WEAR A SEAT BELT WHEN TRAVELLING IN THE FRONT, OR THE REAR, OF A VEHICLE THAT HAS SEAT BELTS FITTED.

ALWAYS MAKE SURE THAT CHILDREN TRAVEL IN AN APPROPRIATE CHILD RESTRAINT OR IN A SEAT BELT IF THEY ARE TOO BIG FOR A CHILD RESTRAINT.

Please refer to the fact sheet on Seat Belt Law for further information on the legal aspects.

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Road Safety..... Information

Facts And Figures

Car occupants form 65% of all road casualties. In 2003, 188,342 people were killed or injured while travelling in cars. Of these, 123,786 (88%) were drivers or front seat passengers.

Table 1 Car Occupant Casualties 2003¹

	Driver	Front Seat Passenger	Rear Seat Passenger	All Occupants*
Fatal	1,169	396	204	1,769
Serious	9,871	3,550	2,101	15,522
Slight	112,746	38,198	20,107	171,051
Total	123,786	42,144	22,412	188,342

**including seating position unknown*

Over 90% of adult front seat passengers and drivers wear seat belts, as do 66% of adult rear seat passengers. If wearing rates in the rear were as high as those in the front, a further 30 adult lives would be saved each year.

Since the law to wear seat belts in the front was introduced in 1983, front seat belts are estimated to have saved 50,000 lives, 590,000 serious casualties and 1.5 million minor injuries.

50,000 lives saved equates to 7 lives saved every day for the last 20 years.

As many as 15 front seat occupants are killed annually by the impact of an unbelted rear seat passenger.

The wearing rate for van drivers is currently 63% and for their passengers, only 55%. If the wearing rate in vans matched that for cars then 20 more lives would be saved annually.

Seat belt wearing rates are higher in rural areas 93% than in urban areas 89%.

Women (94%) are more conscientious than men (86%) at wearing a seat belt.

In the back, over 90% of children wear seat belts or child restraints.

For the youngest children aged 0 to 4 years the wearing rate is 97%.

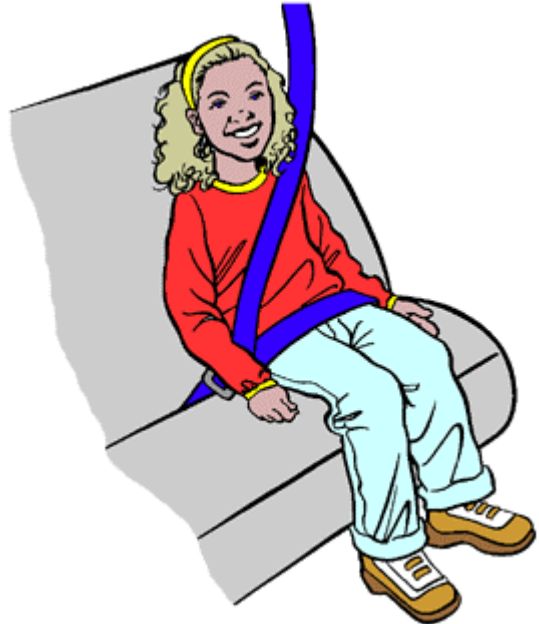
Despite continued advertising about the dangers of not wearing a seat belt, a core 10% of Britain's 28 million drivers still fail to belt up for every journey. Almost a third of people don't always belt up in the back of the car and 1 in 10 never bother.

¹ 'Road Casualties Great Britain: 2003' The Stationery Office

Ensuring You Use A Seat Belt Correctly

In order to wear a seat belt safely, the following points should be adhered to:

- The belt should be worn as tight as possible, with no slack
- The lap belt should go over the pelvic region, not the stomach
- The diagonal strap should rest over the shoulder, not the neck
- Nothing should obstruct the smooth movement of the belt by trapping it



In most modern vehicles, the height of the top of the seat belt can be adjusted on the B-pillar. If you cannot get the seat belt to fit over you correctly, as described above, you should try adjusting the height.

Damaged Seat Belts

Seat belts should be regularly checked for damage. Common forms of damage to the seat belt that will reduce its effectiveness in an accident, and also lead to the vehicle failing an MOT test, are:

- Fraying or fluffing around the edges of the seat belt
- A cut which causes the fabric to split
- A hole in the seat belt
- Damage to the buckle

In an accident, the webbing of a seat belt stretches, which absorbs some of the energy in an impact. This helps prevent any injury from the contact between the seat belt and occupant. A seat belt that has restrained an occupant in an accident would be more likely to cause an occupant injury if it were involved in another accident, and must always be replaced.

If any forces are applied to a seat belt, which are larger than would be expected during its usual operational life, it may also be worth having it checked to see if the webbing of the belt has been strained.

If in doubt, take your car to a garage to have the belt inspected by an expert.

Pregnant Occupants and Seat Belts

All pregnant women must wear seat belts by law when travelling in cars. This applies to both front and back seats and pregnancy does not in itself automatically provide exemption from the law. The safest way for pregnant women to wear a seat belt is:

- Place the diagonal strap between the breasts (over the breastbone) with the strap resting over the shoulder, not the neck.
- Place the lap belt flat on the thighs, fitting comfortably beneath the enlarged abdomen, and over the pelvis not the bump.
- The belt should be worn as tight as possible.



In this way the forces applied in a sudden impact can be absorbed by the body's frame.

Pregnant women should not wear 'Lap-only-Belts' as they have been shown to cause grave injuries to unborn children in the event of sudden deceleration. Mother and unborn child are both safer in a collision if a lap and diagonal seat belt is being worn correctly.

Lap Belts

Although lap belts are not recommended for pregnant women, they are safe and suitable for other adult passengers. Three-point seat belts are safer, but wearing a lap belt is far better than wearing no seat belt at all, because the greatest risk of injury to car occupants in an accident comes from being thrown about inside the vehicle or being ejected from it.

The lap belt should go over the pelvis (not the soft stomach area) and fit as tightly as possible. Most car manufacturers now fit at least some of their range with a three-point seat belt in the centre of the rear seat.



Seat Belt Adjustment

Several devices exist which are designed to attach to the seat belts in order to pull them into a different position or change the way in which they rest on an occupant.

A common form of seat belt adjuster changes the path of the adult belt over the shoulder of a younger occupant. RoSPA do not recommend the use of these devices, as no standards currently exist ensuring a basic crashworthiness. It is much safer to purchase an appropriate child restraint, as they are crash tested to a European wide standard.

Other devices, which pad the seat belt, may also degrade its performance in a crash and put an occupant at greater risk.

Child Restraints

RoSPA has a website, www.childcarseats.org.uk, which provides advice on choosing, fitting and using child car restraints, details of legal requirements for using child restraints in other countries, links to manufacturers, retailers, and other organisations that can provide help or advice about child car restraints and a search facility to find local sources of help and information in your area.

Child restraints are divided into categories, according to the weight of the children for which they are suitable. These correspond broadly to different age groups, but it is the weight of the child that is most important when deciding what type of child restraint to use.

An appropriate child restraint is one which:

- conforms to the United Nations standard, [ECE Regulation 44-03](#)
- is suitable for the child's weight and size
- is correctly fitted according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Retailers often describe child restraints in terms of 'Stages':

Stage 1 = Groups 0 and 0+

Stage 2 = Group 1

Stage 3 = Group 2

Stage 4 = Group 3

Some child restraints are capable of being converted as the child grows and, therefore, fit into more than one group or stage.

The main types are

Rearward-facing Baby Seats



Group 0 for babies up to 10 kgs (22 lbs) roughly from birth to 6-9 months, or

Group 0+ for babies up to 13kg (29lbs) roughly from birth to 12-15 months

They can be used in the front or rear of the car, but it is safer to put them in the rear. **DO NOT** put them in the front passenger seat if there is a passenger airbag. Rearward-facing seats provide greater protection for the baby's head, neck and spine than forward-facing seats. So, it is best to keep your baby in a rearward-facing seat for as long as possible.

Only move them to a forward-facing seat once they have exceeded the maximum weight for the baby seat, or the top of their head is higher than the top of the seat.

Forward-facing child seat



Group 1 for children weighing 9-18 kgs (20-40 lbs) roughly from 9 months - 4 years

They can be used in the front or rear of the car, but it is safer to put them in the rear, especially if there is a passenger airbag in the front.

Booster seat



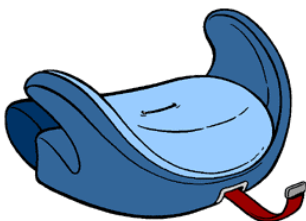
Only move your child to a booster seat once they have exceeded the maximum weight for the child seat, or the top of their head is higher than the top of the seat.

Group 2 for children weighing 15 - 25 kgs (33 - 55 lbs) roughly 4 to 6 years.

They can be used in the front or rear of the car, but it is safer to put them in the rear, especially if there is a passenger airbag in the front.

Some Booster seats are designed to be converted into a booster cushion by detaching the back rest.

Booster Cushion



Group 3: for children weighing 22 - 36 kgs (48 - 79 lbs) roughly from 6 - 11 years

They can be used in the front or rear of the car, but it is safer to put them in the rear, especially if there is a passenger airbag in the front.

Booster seats and booster cushions do not have an integral harness to hold the child in place. The adult seat belt goes around the child and the seat. So it is important that the seat belt is correctly adjusted so that:

- The belt is worn as tight as possible, with no slack
- The lap belt should go over the pelvic region, not the stomach
- The diagonal strap should rest over the shoulder, not the neck