

CAR SEAT SAFETY

Every state requires that infants and children ride buckled up. However, state laws do not always require the safest way to transport a child. More children are still killed as passengers in car crashes than from any other type of injury. Using a car safety seat correctly can help prevent injuries to young children, but it is not as easy as you think. Just a little mistake in how the seat is used could cause serious injury to your child.

Which is the “best” car safety seat?

- No one seat is safest” or best.” The best” car safety seat is one that fits your child’s size and weight, and can be installed correctly in your car.
- Price does not always make a difference. Higher prices can mean added features that may or may not make the seat easier to use.
- When you find a seat you like, try it out! Put your child in the seat and adjust the harnesses and buckles. Make sure it fits in your car.
- Keep in mind that displays or illustrations of seats in stores do not always show them being used correctly.

Types of Car Seats

Infant-only seats

- Only can be used rear-facing
- Are used for babies who weigh up to 20 pounds (or more, depending on the model)
- Are small and portable and fit newborns best
- Come with a 3-point harness or a 5 point harness

Infant only seat features

- 1. Detachable base.** Several infant only seat models come with detachable bases. The base attaches to the car and the car safety seat easily snaps into the base. This way, you can carry your baby in and out of the car without needing to re-install the seat. After buckling your baby into the seat, you simply lock the seat into the installed base. Some bases are adjustable to make it easier to correctly recline newborns. These seats also can be used without the base or you can buy additional bases for other cars. However, this feature is only helpful if the base fits tightly into your car. In some cases, the seat may fit better without the base.
- 2. Higher weight and height limits.** Several infant-only seats are available for use up to 22 pounds, and at least one is available for use up to 35 pounds. Many convertible seats also now have higher weight and height limits in the rear-facing position for heavier or taller babies. Keep in mind that some babies may reach the top height limits of the seat before they reach the top weight limits. If your infant’s weight or height exceeds the limits of the seat before a year, use an infant-only seat or a rear-facing convertible seat that has a higher limit.
- 3. Harness slots.** Infant-only seats that come with more than one harness slot give more room for growing babies. In the rear-facing position, the harness slots usually should be at or below your baby’s shoulders. Check the car safety seat manufacturer’s instructions to be sure.
- 4. Handles.** Carrying handles on car safety seats vary greatly in style and ease of use. Check the instructions for how to adjust the handle during travel.
- 5. Other features.** Angle indicators, built-in angle adjusters, harness adjusters, and head support systems are other features that may make correct installation easier to achieve.

Convertible seats

- Are bigger and heavier than infant-only seats, but can be used longer and for larger children
- May not fit newborns as well as some infant-only seats. Make sure that your baby can recline comfortably in the seat. Check the car safety seat manufacturer's instructions to be sure that harnesses can be adjusted properly.
- Are used rear-facing for infants until they have reached at least 1 year of age and weigh at least 20 pounds (or more depending on model). The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that babies be kept in rear-facing seats until they reach the maximum weight allowed, as long as the top of the head is below the top of the seat back.
- Can be used forward-facing for toddlers who are at least 1 year of age *and* weigh at least 20 pounds and not more than 40 pounds. When your child is older than 1 year of age and has reached the highest weight or height allowed by the seat for use rear-facing, you may turn the seat forward-facing and make the following 3 adjustments:
 - Move the shoulder Straps to the slots at or above your child's shoulders (usually the top slots, but check your instructions to make sure).
 - Move the seat into the upright position. (Check the car safety seat manufacturer's instructions for the recline angle allowed when forward-facing.)
 - Route the seat belt through the forward-facing belt path.
- Have the following 3 types of harnesses:
 - **5-point harness**-5 straps: 2 at the shoulders, 2 at the hips, 1 at the crotch
 - **Overhead shield**-A padded tray-like shield that swings down around the child
 - **T-shield**-A padded T-shaped or triangular shield attached to shoulder straps

Note: If using a convertible seat for a small infant, the best choice for a more secure fit is the 5-point harness. A small baby's face can hit a shield in a crash.

Convertible seat features

- 1. Adjustable buckles and shields.** Many convertible seats have 2 or more buckle positions to give you extra room for a growing child or bulky clothing. Many overhead shields can be adjusted as well.
- 2. Higher weight limits.** Several convertible seats are now available with higher rear-facing weight limits for bigger babies. For larger babies, look for a seat that can be used rear facing up to 30 or 35 pounds.

Combination seats

- Cannot be used rear-facing.
- Are only for children who are at least 1 year of age and weigh at least 20 pounds.
- Have an internal harness system for children who weigh 40 pounds or less.
- Convert to belt-positioning boosters (by removing the harnesses) for children who weigh more than 40 pounds. This allows the seat to be used longer.

Forward-facing seats/restraints

- Cannot be used rear-facing
- Are only for children who are at least 1 year of age and weigh at least 20 pounds
- Can be used with lap only belt or lap/shoulder belt

Children who weigh 40 pounds or less are best protected in a seat with a full harness. Significant injuries have occurred to children in shield boosters in crashes due to ejection, excessive head movement, and shield contact. Although boosters with shields may meet current Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards for use by children who weigh 30-40 pounds, on the basis of current published peer-reviewed data, the AAP does not recommend their use. Children should remain in a convertible, forward-facing, or combination seat with a full harness until they reach the top weight or height allowed by the seat.

Travel vests

A travel vest may be an option if your car has only lap belts.

Built-in seats (integrated seats)

Built-in seats are available in some cars and vans. They may be used for children who are at least 1 year of age and weigh at least 20 pounds. Built-in seats eliminate installation problems. However, weight and height limits vary. Check with vehicle manufacturers for details about built-in seats that are currently available.

Car seats and shopping carts

Do not place a child of any age in a shopping cart. Many infant-only car seats lock into shopping carts. Although infant seats may help prevent falls from shopping carts, injuries can still occur if the cart tips over. The weight of an infant in an infant seat placed high in a shopping cart may make the cart more top-heavy and more likely to tip over. This is true even for shopping carts with built-in infant seats. Thousands of children are hurt every year from falling from shopping carts or from the carts tipping over. Instead, use a backpack, front pack, or stroller while shopping.

Basics of car safety seat use

- Always use a car safety seat, starting with your baby's first ride home from the hospital. Help your child form a lifelong habit of buckling up.
- Read the car safety seat manufacturer's instructions and always keep them with the car safety seat.
- Read your vehicle owner's manual for important information on how to install the car safety seat correctly in your vehicle.
- The safest place for all children to ride is in the back seat.
- Never place a child in a rear-facing car safety seat in the front seat of a vehicle that has a passenger air bag.
- The harness system holds your child in the car safety seat and the seat belt or an anchor system holds the seat in the car. Attach both snugly to protect your child.

Using the Car Seat Safely

Read the car safety seat manufacturer's instructions and the child restraint section of your vehicle owner's manual carefully to be sure you are installing and using the car safety seat correctly. When you install the seat in your car, check the following:

Is your child buckled into the car safety seat correctly?

- Be sure to use the correct harness slots for the child.
- Keep the harnesses snug. Place the plastic harness clip, if provided, at armpit level to hold shoulder straps in place.
- Make sure the straps lie flat and are not twisted.
- Dress your baby in clothes that allow the straps to go between the legs. Adjust the straps to allow for the thickness of your child's clothes, making sure that the harness still holds the child securely.
- In cold weather, tuck blankets around your baby after adjusting the harness straps snugly.
- To keep your newborn from slouching, pad the sides of the seat and between the crotch with rolled up diapers or receiving blankets.

Is the car safety seat buckled into your vehicle correctly?

- Place the seat facing the correct direction for the size and age of your child. Route the seat belt through the correct path on the car safety seat (check your instructions to make sure) and pull it tight. Before each trip, check to make sure the car safety seat is installed tightly enough by pulling on the car safety seat where the seat belt passes through. It should not move easily side to side or toward the front of the car.
- If your infant's head flops forward, the seat may not be reclined enough. Tilt the seat back until it is reclined as close as possible to a 45-degree angle (according to manufacturer's instructions). Your seat may have a built-in recline adjuster for this purpose. If not, you may wedge firm padding, such as a rolled towel, under the front of the base of the seat.
- Check the seat belt buckle. Make sure it does not lie just at the point where the belt bends around the car safety seat. If it does, you will not be able to get the belt tight enough. If you cannot get the belt tight, check the car safety seat and vehicle manufacturer's instructions for recommendations. You may need to use another set of belts in the car that can be tightened properly.
- Many lap/shoulder belts allow passengers to move freely even when they are buckled. Read your car owner's manual to see if your seat belts can be locked into position or if you will need to use a locking clip. Locking clips come with all new car safety seats (some have them built in). Read your instructions for information on how to use the locking clip.
- Some lap belts need a special, heavy-duty locking clip, available from the vehicle manufacturer. Check your car owner's manual for more information.

What is LATCH? A new car safety seat attachment system has been developed to make car safety seats easier to use and safer. The system is called LATCH, which stands for Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children. This new anchor system will make correct installation much easier because you will no longer need to use seat belts to secure the car safety seat. Starting in model year 2002, most new vehicles and new safety seats will be equipped with these lower anchors and attachments. However, unless both the vehicle and the car safety seat have this new anchor system, seat belts will still be needed to secure the car safety seat.

Why are tethers important? Most new car safety seats that can be used facing forward come with top tethers. A tether is a strap that hooks the top of the car safety seat to a special permanent anchor in the vehicle. Most anchors are located on the rear window ledge, the back of the vehicle seat, or the floor or ceiling of the vehicle. Tethers give extra protection by keeping the car safety seat from being thrown forward in a crash.

Tether kits are available for most older car safety seats. Check with the car safety seat manufacturer to find out how to get a top tether for your seat. Be sure to install it according to instructions. The tether strap may help make some seats that are difficult to install fit more tightly.

All new cars, minivans, and light trucks have been required to have upper tether anchors for securing the tops of car safety seats since September 2000.

There are a number of add-on products on the market that claim to solve the problem of poorly fitting seat belts. However, these products may actually interfere with proper lap and shoulder belt fit by causing the lap belt to ride too high on the abdomen and making the shoulder belt too loose. Until the NHTSA develops standards for these products, the AAP recommends they not be used.

Are you using a secondhand seat? Double-check everything! A new car safety seat is best. However, if you must get a used seat, shop very carefully. Keep the following points in mind:

Do not use a car safety seat that

- **Is too old.** Look on the label for the date it was made. If it is more than 10 years old, it should not be used. Some manufacturers recommend that seats only be used for 5—6 years. Check with the manufacturer to find out when the company recommends getting a new seat.
- **Was in a crash.** It may have been weakened and should not be used, even if it looks fine. Do not use a seat if you do not know its full history.
- **Does not have a label with the date of manufacture and seat name or model number.** Without these, you cannot check on recalls.
- **Does not come with instructions.** You need them to know how to use the car safety seat. Do not rely on the former owner's directions. Get a copy of the instruction manual from the manufacturer before you use the seat.
- **Has any cracks in the frame of the seat.**
- **Is missing parts.** Used seats often come without important parts. Check with the manufacturer to make sure you can get the right parts.

Proper installation

For specific information about installing your car safety seat, you may consult a certified Child Passenger Safety (CPS) Technician. The American Automobile Association (AAA) certifies CPS Technicians. A list of certified CPS Technicians is available by state or ZIP code on the NHTSA Web site at <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/CPS/Contacts/index.cfm>

A list of inspection stations staffed by certified CPS Technicians is available at

<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/nhtsa/whatis/regions/index.cfm>

The information is available by telephone on the NHTSA Auto Safety Hot Line at 888/DASH-2-DOT (888/321-4236), from 8am to 10pm ET Monday through Friday.

A new toll-free number and Web site sponsored by an automobile manufacturer and supported by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) allows consumers to locate the nearest seat Inspection facility for hands-on assistance: (866) SEAT-CHECK, or (866) 7328-24325, and <http://www.seatcheck.org>.

Has the car safety seat been recalled? You can find out by calling the manufacturer or the Auto Safety Hot Line at 888/DASH-2-DOT (888/327-4236), from 8 am to 10 PM ET, Monday through Friday. This information is also available on the NHTSA Web site at <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/cars/problems/recalls/index.cfm>. If the seat has been recalled, be sure to follow instructions to fix it or get the necessary pads. You also may get a registration card for future recall notices from the hot line.

Common Questions about Car Safety Seats

What if my baby is premature? Use a car safety seat without a shield. Shields often are too high and too far from the body to fit correctly. A small baby's face could hit a shield in a crash. While still in the hospital, your baby should be observed in her car safety seat to make sure that the semi-reclined position does not cause low heart rate, low oxygen, or other breathing problems. If your baby needs to lie flat during travel, use a crash-tested car bed. If possible, an adult should ride in the back seat next to your baby to watch him closely.

What if my baby weighs more than 20 pounds but is not 1 year of age yet? There are now several infant-only and convertible seats that can be used rear-facing for children weighing more than 20 pounds.

What if my baby is longer than the rear-facing height limits and not yet 1 year of age? Keep your child rear facing until his head is one inch from the top of the seat.

What if my car only has lap belts in the back seat? Lap belts work fine with infant-only, convertible, and forward-facing seats. They cannot be used with belt-positioning boosters (which are safest for children who weigh more than 40 pounds and who are not big enough to fit in adult seat belts). If your car only has lap belts, use a forward-facing seat with a harness approved for use to higher weights, use a forward-facing restraint, or check with your dealer or the manufacturer of your car to see if shoulder harnesses can be installed. Some travel vests can be used with lap belts. Another thing you can do is buy another car with lap/shoulder belts in the back seat.

What if I drive more children than can be buckled safely in the back seat? Avoid this situation, especially if your car has passenger air bags. However, in an emergency, place the child most likely to sit in the proper forward-facing position in the front seat, with the vehicle seat moved as far back as possible. A child in a forward-facing car safety seat may be the best choice because a child who is in a booster seat or using a regular seat belt can more easily move out of position and be at greater risk for injuries from the air bag.

What if I lose my instructions to my car safety seat? If you do not have the car safety seat manufacturer's instructions, write or call the company's consumer relations department, identifying the model number, name of seat, and date of manufacture. The manufacturer's address and phone number may be on the label on the seat.

What if my car safety seat was in a crash? A seat that was in a crash may have been weakened and should not be used even if it looks fine. Call the car safety seat manufacturer if you have questions about the safety of your seat.

Can I use a car safety seat on an airplane? The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the AAP recommend that children be securely fastened in child safety seats until 4 years of age, then be secured with the airplane seat belts. This will help keep them safe during takeoff and landing, or in case of turbulence. Most infant, convertible, and forward-facing seats are certified for use on airplanes. Booster seats and travel vests are not. Check the label on your seat and call the airline before you travel to be sure your seat meets current FM regulations.

Always Read and follow the Manufacturer's Recommendations

One-Minute Car Seat Safety Check

Using a car seat correctly makes a big difference. Even the "safest" seat may not protect your child in a crash unless it is used correctly. So take a minute to check to be sure...

Does your car have a passenger air bag?

- An infant in a rear-facing seat should NEVER be placed in the front seat of a vehicle that has a passenger air bag.
- The safest place for all children to ride is in the back seat.
- If an older child must ride in the front seat, move the vehicle seat as far back from the air bag as possible and buckle the child properly.

Is your child facing the right way for both weight and age?

- Infants should ride facing the back of the car until they have reached at least 1 year of age **AND** weigh at least 20 pounds.
- A child who weighs over 20 pounds **AND** is older than 1 year of age may face forward. However, it is safest for a child to ride rear-facing until she reaches the height and weight limit of the seat.
- A child who weighs 20 pounds before he reaches 1 year of age should ride rear-facing in a convertible seat approved for use at higher weights.

Have you tried the car seat in your vehicle?

- Not all car seats fit in all vehicles.
- When the car seat is installed, be sure it does not move side-to-side or toward the front of the car.
- Be sure to read the section on car seats in the owner's manual for your car.

Is the seat belt in the right place and pulled tight?

- Route the seat belt through the correct path (check your instructions to make sure), kneel in the seat to press it down, and pull the belt *tight*.
- A convertible seat has two different belt paths, one for infants and one for toddlers.
- Check the owner's manual for your car to see if you need to use a locking clip and read the car seat instructions to see if you need a tether to keep the safety seat secure.

Is the harness snug; does it stay on your child's shoulders?

- The shoulder straps of the car seat usually go in the lowest slots for infants riding backward and in the highest slots for children facing forward. (Check the car seat manufacturer's instructions to be sure.)
- The chest clip should be placed at armpit level to keep the harness straps on the shoulders.
- Harnesses should fit snugly against your child's body. Check the instructions on how to adjust the straps.

Do you have the instructions for the car seat?

- Follow them and keep them with the car seat. You will need them as your child gets bigger.
- Be sure to send in the registration card that comes with the car seat. It will be important in case your car seat is recalled.

Has your child's car seat been recalled?

- Call the Auto Safety Hotline for a list of recalled seats that need repair.
- Be sure to make any necessary repairs to your car seat.

Has your child's car seat been in a crash?

- If so, it may have been weakened and should not be used, even if it looks all right.
- Call the car seat manufacturer if you have questions about the safety of your seat.

Is your car seat more than 6 years old?

- If so it should be discarded and replaced with a new model

Air Bag Safety

An air bag can save your life. However, air bags and young children do not mix. The following information will help keep you and your children safe.

- The safest place for all infants and children under 12 years of age to ride is in the back seat.
- *Never* put an infant under 1 year of age in the front seat of a car with an air bag.
- Infants must always ride in rear-facing car seats in the back seat until they are at least 20 pounds AND 1 year of age.
- All children should be properly secured in car safety seats, booster seats, or shoulder/lap belts correct for their size.
- Seat belts must be worn correctly at all times by all passengers to provide the best protection.

What Parents Can Do

- Eliminate potential risks of air bags to children by buckling them in the backseat for every ride.
- Plan ahead so that you do not have to drive with more children than can be safely restrained in the backseat.
- For most families, installation of air bag on/off switches is not necessary. Air bags that are turned off provide no protection to older children, teens, parents, or other adults riding in the front seat.
- Air bag on/off switches should only be used if your child has special health care needs, your pediatrician recommends constant observation during travel, and no other adult is available to ride in the back seat with your child.
- If no other arrangement is possible and an older child must ride in the front seat, move the vehicle seat back as far as it can go, away from the air bag. Be sure the child is properly buckled. Keep in mind that your child may still be at risk for injuries from the air bag. The back seat is the safest place for children to ride.