

DEFENSIVE DRIVING BASICS PROTECTING OCCUPANTS

These days all vehicles are required to have occupant protection installed for both front-seat and back-seat passengers. And the protective devices get safer and more comfortable each year. Here are some of the choices you may encounter.

Safety Belts

Lap belts have long been available in passenger cars. Safety belts now include a lap belt and a shoulder harness. Belts should be worn with the lap belt low and snug across the hips and the shoulder strap snug across the chest. If your car has automatic shoulder belts, remember that you must still buckle the lap belt. The shoulder belt alone will not protect you in a collision.

Safety belts were not designed for small children. You must secure any child under 8 years old in a federally approved child car seat while operating the vehicle, unless the child is more than 4'9" tall.

Many people don't use safety belts because they believe they will be trapped in the vehicle after an accident. Others don't bother on short trips. But studies show that most crashes occur within seven miles of home. They also show that when you wear your safety belt, you have a 45 percent better chance of surviving a serious crash. So buckle up.

Air Bags

New cars now have air bags installed in the steering wheel, dashboard, sides and roof. They inflate automatically in a crash of 12 miles per hour or more. They deflate within one second of inflating. Air bags must be replaced once they have been used.

Many people fear that air bags will inflate accidentally. In fact this rarely happens, and if it did, the driver would probably not lose control because the bag deflates rapidly after inflating. Furthermore, air bags do not contain harmful gas or cause injury or hearing damage.

Air bags are not designed to be used instead of seat belts. Always buckle up, even if you have air bags.