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Further Information

To find out more about the fitting and wearing of seat belts and road safety in general, please contact your Road Safety Officer through your local Council, or in Scotland, your Road Safety Training Officer through your local Authority or Police Force.

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Seat belts and child restraints



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Wearing a seat belt saves lives

For your own and others' safety, the law requires you to use a seat belt if one is fitted.

Seat belt wearing in the front seat saves over 2,200 lives every year. Everyone knows they should wear a seat belt in the front seat, but many people still don't realise how dangerous it is not to wear a seat belt in the back.

In a crash at 30mph, if you are unrestrained, you will hit the front seat, and anyone in it, with a force of between 30 and 60 times your own body weight.

Such an impact could result in death or serious injury to both yourself and front seat occupants.

Any award for damages following an accident may be reduced if you were not wearing a seat belt.



The law

In law:

- You must wear a seat belt if one is fitted. There are few exceptions to this and the driver is liable to prosecution if a child under 14 years does not wear a seat belt.
- You must not carry an unrestrained child in the front seat of any vehicle.
- Children under three years travelling in the front of any vehicle must be carried in an appropriate child restraint. The adult belt may not be used.
- If an appropriate child restraint or seat belt is available for use in the front, but not in the rear, children between 3 and 11 and under 1.5m in height must use the front seat restraint or seat belt.

The law is summarised in the table below.

	Front seat	Rear seat	Who is responsible
Driver	Seat belt must be worn if fitted		Driver
Child under 3 years of age	Appropriate child restraint must be worn	Appropriate child restraint must be used if available	Driver
Child aged 3 to 11 and under 1.5 metres (approx 5ft) in height	Appropriate child restraint must be used if available. If not an adult seat belt must be worn	Appropriate child restraint must be used if available. If not an adult seat belt must be worn if available	Driver
Child aged 12 or 13 or younger child 1.5 metres (approx 5ft) or more in height	Adult seat belt must be worn if available	Adult seat belt must be worn if available	Driver
Adult passengers (aged 14 and upwards)	Seat belt must be worn if available	Seat belt must be worn if available	Passenger

Which vehicles does the law affect?

Front seats of all vehicles, including vans, coaches, buses and goods vehicles where seat belts are fitted. Rear seats of cars and small minibuses (with an unladen weight of 2,540kgs or less) where seat belts are fitted.

Whilst the law does not presently require seat belts to be worn in the rear seats of larger minibuses or coaches, they should be used if fitted.



What if there are not enough seat belts available?

Seat belt wearing law does not prevent you from carrying more passengers than there are seat belts and restraints, but the way in which passengers are carried must not cause danger to any person in the vehicle. If you have to choose who rides without a belt or restraint, remember that heavier passengers can cause greater injury to others in an accident than lighter passengers.

If no restraint is available for children under three years, where practicable it is generally safer for them to wear an adult belt, rather than no restraint at all. However, remember that unrestrained children can only travel in the back.

Seat belt use

Drivers and front seat passengers should sit as far back as is reasonably possible from the steering wheel or dashboard to reduce the possibility of serious head or chest injuries in an accident.

Lap-and-diagonal belts provide more protection and should be used before lap-only belts.

Adjust the seat belt properly. Place the lap belt as low as possible over the hips – not over the abdomen. Ensure the shoulder belt lies on the chest and over the shoulder. Do not leave any slack in the belt.



Never put the same seat belt around two children, or around yourself and another passenger (adult or child).

Do not allow your child to move up to using the adult belt too early (see page 9).

Many cars are now fitted with height adjusters for the diagonal strap. The diagonal strap should be adjusted to lie centrally over the shoulder and

away from the neck. Adjust the strap so that it lies in contact with your shoulder and slopes up and back to the anchorage point.

Do not interfere with the correct function of the seat belt by fitting any comfort devices that are not recommended by your vehicle manufacturer.

Do not attempt to improve seat belt comfort with padding or cushions. It is also not advisable to sit on any mats or cushions other than those originally fitted by the vehicle manufacturer. Avoid thick clothing (such as coats and jackets) under the seat belt.

The centre rear seats of many cars are fitted with a lap-only seat belt that must be adjusted manually. It is important that you adjust such belts for a snug fit over your hips, without any slack.

Pregnant women

Like all drivers or passengers, pregnant women must wear a seat belt, unless their doctor certifies that they are medically exempt – there is no automatic exemption. Wearing one may not be comfortable, but it improves safety for both mother and unborn baby.



The lap strap should go across the hips, fitting comfortably under the bump, while the diagonal strap should be placed between the breasts around the bump.

A lap-and-diagonal seat belt is preferable to a lap-only belt; however, wearing a lap-only belt is better than wearing no belt at all. In cars fitted with airbags, the front seat (whether the driver's or front passenger's) should be pushed back as far as practical.

Airbags

Studies show that drivers of airbag equipped cars suffer fewer severe head injuries in accidents. However airbags are not substitutes for seat belts – they are designed to work with them. Given the speed and force with which an airbag inflates, it is vitally important that you always wear your seat belt and that you do not sit too close to the steering wheel or dashboard. In the US and Canada, where they have had experience of airbags for many years, they advise that the distance between the centre of the steering wheel to your breastbone should be at least 10 inches (25cm). However, airbag systems differ from car to car, therefore always check and follow specific advice from the manufacturer of your vehicle. This is particularly important in relation to children and frontal airbags.

Disabled person's belts

Disabled drivers or passengers may need to use specially adapted belts known as 'disabled person's belts'. Their design may differ from the standard lap or 3-point seat belt and they are intended for use solely by disabled people.

Child restraint systems

Injuries to children can be significantly reduced if they use a suitable child restraint. Child restraints come in a wide variety – baby seats, child seats, booster seats and booster cushions – and they must carry the United Nations "E" mark or a BS "Kitemark". The latest version of the United Nations standard is ECE Regulation 44-03, and restraints which are so approved carry an approval number starting with '03'. Very few restraints now carry a BS "Kitemark".



Allow plenty of time when fitting a child restraint in your car and always follow the manufacturer's instructions carefully. Recent vehicles may have ISOFix attachment points, particularly in rear seats. An ISOFix child restraint is installed using these and not the adult seat belt (although many can also be used with adult belts). They are easier and quicker to install accurately and safely. But always check whether a child restraint is suitable for the ISOFix points in your car – some will differ.

Make sure your child restraint is properly fitted every time you use it.

Before buying a child restraint, you should try it in your car to make sure it can be fitted properly. Ask the seller to demonstrate how to use it. A properly installed restraint must fit tightly into the adult seat – push your weight against it while tightening the adult seat belt. The seat belt buckle should not rest on the restraint frame. Beware of old or second-hand baby and child restraints which may be damaged or worn out and which may not have the correct fitting instructions. They may not provide the most up to date level of protection.

Rear-facing baby seats provide very high levels of protection for young babies but they should never be used where a front seat is protected by an active airbag.

Booster cushions should be used by older children under 150cms in height. This is so that the straps of the adult belt fit properly across the chest and the hips. Do not let them move up to an adult belt designed for those 150cms and above too soon.

This table summarises which child restraint type is suitable for a range of child weights. However, for specific information in relation to your child, you should refer to the packaging and manufacturer's instructions for the suitability of the restraint for your child.

Child restraint type	Weight range	Age (range approx)
Baby Seat	Up to 13kgs	Birth to 9 – 12 months
Child Seat	9kgs to 18kgs	9 months to 4 years
Booster Seat	15kgs to 25kgs	4 years to 6 years
Booster cushion	22kgs to 36kgs	6 years to 11 years

Baby seat

WARNING. Never use a rear-facing child restraint in the front seat of a car fitted with an active frontal airbag. This is because the restraint will be too close to the dashboard and in an accident, the expanding airbag is liable to cause serious or fatal injury to the child.

For a very young child, this is the safest type of restraint available. A baby seat is rear-facing and can be fitted in the front or rear of a car using the adult lap-and-diagonal seat belt, following the manufacturer's instructions. A portable baby seat can be convenient to use and to carry, and you are more likely to use it on every journey.

Some baby seats can be converted into forward-facing child seats and may therefore be usable until your child is about four years old.



Child seat

A child seat is a separately framed seat designed to be secured either by an adult seat belt through its frame, or by additional fixings such as webbing straps or ISOFix attachment points. The child is then restrained by the seat's harness which has the advantage of being specifically designed for a child. Remember to follow the manufacturer's instructions when fitting the restraint. A child seat can be forward or rear-facing.

A child seat harness should include a 'crotch strap' which will prevent the child from sliding out feet first under the belt in an accident.

Booster seat

A booster seat raises and locates a child so that an adult seat belt can be used effectively. It incorporates slots to guide the adult seat belt straps around a child and must be used as instructed by the manufacturer. Both the booster seat and the child are restrained by the adult seat belt.

A booster seat is intended to be used with an adult lap-and-diagonal seat belt. Some may be designed to be used with an adult lap-belt.



Booster cushion

This is for a child who is too large for a child seat or booster seat. It is designed to raise a child so that the adult seat belt can be used safely across both chest and hips. It must be used as instructed by the manufacturer.

Some booster cushions have guides to improve the position of the adult seat belt across the hips and shoulder.

Do not allow your child to move up to using the adult belt too early.

Adult belts are designed for people with an adult bone structure and who are 150cms (approximately 4'11") and taller. They are not designed to deal with the needs of children. A booster seat or cushion may not be popular with your child but it is designed to bring them up into the right position so that the adult belt can provide adequate protection. Getting the lap strap to go from hip to hip across the upper thigh (rather than across the stomach) is just as important as getting the diagonal strap to fit across the chest properly.



Carrycots

Carrycots with restraint straps are not designed to withstand the considerable forces generated in an accident. A baby seat is safer and more convenient than a carrycot, although doctors may occasionally advise the use of carrycots, eg for premature or very low birth weight babies. The best advice is that carrycots should be used only if the alternative is for a child to travel without any restraint at all.

Never put a child in the luggage space of hatchbacks or estate cars except in a restraint specifically designed for the purpose.

Exemptions from seat belt wearing

There is a specific exemption from seat belt wearing on medical grounds. There are some other exemptions, for example when reversing.

If you think you should not wear a seat belt on medical grounds, please consult your doctor. He/she will decide and, if warranted will issue you a formal "Certificate of Exemption from Compulsory Seat Belt Wearing". This must be produced if the police ask you for it.

If you are claiming certain benefits you may be entitled to assistance towards the cost of any medical examination for a medical exemption certificate.

For more information please contact:

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