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Children and Passenger-Side Air Bags

Of the approximately 42 million vehicles having driver-side airbags, about half of them are also equipped with passenger-side air bags. In roughly two-thirds of vehicle trips, the right front passenger seat is unoccupied. Even so, it is estimated that right front passenger air bags saved the lives of 99 passengers over the age of 10. This represents a 23 percent reduction for this population.

However, an analysis of passenger fatalities indicates that airbags pose a “significant risk” to children in the right front seat. It is estimated that for children under the age of ten, there is actually a 33 percent *increase* in fatalities. During the period evaluated in a recent survey, 17 child and 7 infant deaths were directly attributable to airbags deployed in low-severity crashes.

These deaths have involved unbelted or improperly belted children, as well as infants in rear-facing car seats placed in the front seats. It is hypothesized that as a result of pre-impact braking, the children probably moved forward into close contact with the airbag at the time of deployment. Due to the force of the energized airbag, most died from neck injuries. This can also be a problem for the elderly or for short-statured persons sitting close to the airbags, who are not wearing seat belt restraints.

So while air bags continue to provide excellent protection for adults, especially those who are properly restrained with seat belts, they can be a very real hazard to young, unbelted children. As a society, we need to do a better job of informing all drivers of the potential hazards of airbags to unrestrained vehicle occupants. As employers, it is important that we educate our employees. As parents or drivers of children in car pools, it is *imperative* that unrestrained children are not permitted to ride in cars, vans or pick-up trucks—especially in seats “protected” with air bags. Whenever possible, children should ride—properly restrained—in the safer environment of the back seat, rather than the right, front passenger seat.

Whenever an unrestrained child dies due to a neck injury caused by an activated airbag, there is always an adult driver who allowed that condition to exist. Don't *you* be that adult.

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