



U. S. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION  
NATIONAL HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION

## **AIR BAGS AND ON-OFF SWITCHES INFORMATION FOR AN INFORMED DECISION**

### **Keeping the Benefits for the Many and Reducing the Risks for the Few**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Air bags are proven, effective safety devices. From their introduction in the late 1980's through November 1, 1997, air bags saved about 2,620 people. The number of people saved increases each year as air bags become more common on America's roads.

However, the number of lives saved is not the whole story. Air bags are particularly effective in preventing life-threatening and debilitating head and chest injuries. A study of real-world crashes conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) found that the combination of seat belts and air bags is 75 percent effective in preventing serious head injuries and 66 percent effective in preventing serious chest injuries. That means 75 of every 100 people who would have suffered a serious head injury in a crash, and 66 out of 100 people who would have suffered chest injuries, were spared that fate because they wore seat belts and had air bags.

For some people, these life saving and injury-preventing benefits come at the cost of a less severe injury caused by the air bag itself. Most air bag injuries are minor cuts, bruises, or abrasions and are far less serious than the skull fractures and brain injuries that air bags prevent. However, 87 people have been killed by air bags as of November 1, 1997. These deaths are tragic, but rare events -- there have been about 1,800,000 air bag deployments as of that same date.

**The one fact that is common to all who died is NOT their height, weight, sex, or age. Rather, it is the fact that they were too close to the air bag when it started to deploy.** For some, this occurred because they were sitting too close to the air bag. More often this occurred because they were not restrained by seat belts or child safety seats and were thrown forward during pre-crash braking.

The vast majority of people can avoid being too close and can minimize the risk of serious air bag injury by making simple changes in behavior. Shorter drivers can adjust their seating position. Front seat adult passengers can sit a safe distance from their air bag. Infants and children 12 and under should sit in the back seat. And everyone can buckle up. The limited number of people who may not be able to make these changes may benefit from having the opportunity to turn off their air bags when necessary.