

crash.

WHY SOME PEOPLE ARE AT RISK

How do air bag deaths occur?

Air bags are designed to save lives and prevent injuries by cushioning occupants as they move forward in a front-end crash. By providing a cushion, an air bag keeps the occupant's head, neck, and chest from hitting the steering wheel or dashboard. To perform well, an air bag must deploy quickly. The force is greatest in the first 2-3 inches after the air bag bursts through its cover and begins to inflate. Those 2-3 inches are the "risk zone." The force decreases as the air bag inflates farther.

Occupants who are very close to or on top of the air bag when it begins to inflate can be hit with enough force to suffer serious injury or death. However, occupants who are properly restrained and sit 10 inches away from the air bag cover will contact the air bag only after it has completely or almost completely inflated. The air bag then will cushion and protect them from hitting the hard surfaces in the vehicle.

Do both children and adults face risk?

Yes, both children and adults face the risk of air bag injury or death if they are positioned too close to the air bag or fail to use proper restraints. As of November 1, 1997, NHTSA has confirmed that 49 young children have died, all on the passenger side. 38 adults have died -- 35 drivers and 3 passengers.

What were the specific circumstances of the children's deaths?

Almost all of the 49 children who died were improperly restrained or positioned. 12 were infants under age 1 who were riding in rear-facing infant seats in front of the passenger air bag. When placed in the front seat, a rear-facing infant seat places an infant's head within a very few inches of the passenger air bag. In this position, an infant is almost certain to be injured if the air bag deploys. Rear-facing infant seats must ALWAYS be placed in the back seat.

The other 37 children ranged in age from 1 to 9 years; most were 7 or under. 29 of them were totally unrestrained. This includes 4 children who were sitting on the laps of other occupants. The remaining 8 children included some who were riding with their shoulder belts behind them and some who were wearing lap and shoulder belts but who also should have been in booster seats because of their small size and weight. Booster seat use could have improved shoulder belt fit and performance. These various factors allowed the 37 children to get too close to the air bag when it began to inflate.

What were the specific circumstances of the adults' deaths?

Most of the adults who were killed by air bags were not properly restrained. 18 of the 35 drivers, and 2 of the 3 passengers, were totally unbelted. 2 of the drivers who were belted had medical conditions which caused them to slump over the steering wheel immediately before the crash. A few of the drivers did not use their seat belts correctly and the others are believed to have been sitting too close to the steering wheel.