

Fact Sheet

Airbags



What is an Airbag?

An airbag is a flexible bag or pillow like structure which inflates and deflates rapidly during certain types of car accidents. It is a safety device aimed at preventing or minimising injury to passengers when such an accident occurs. Airbags have been effective in preventing serious head and chest injuries in adults when car accidents have occurred. In Australia, airbags are a supplementary restraint system. They are most effective when seatbelts are worn. Airbags can be located in both the front and rear of vehicles.

Frontal Airbags

The airbag module for the driver side is located in the centre of the steering wheel, while the passenger side module (if equipped) can be found in the dashboard above the glove box.

Side Airbags

There are three different types of side air bag systems currently available:

- Roof-mounted side airbags designed to protect the head and neck.
- Door-mounted side airbags designed to protect the chest.
- Seat-mounted airbags designed to protect the chest and head¹

How may a child be injured?

Cuts and bruises

- Children may receive minor cuts, bruises or abrasions when airbags inflate after a car accident has occurred.

Hearing damage

- Children may experience temporary hearing damage, such as a burst eardrum, due to the sound of the inflating airbag.

Struck by object

- Children may sustain broken bones, such as a broken arm, when struck by an airbag.
- In the United States and Canada, deaths have been reported in extreme cases during which children had been struck in the head or chest by an airbag, while sitting too close to it during inflation.

How common are these injuries?

During the period between 1990 and April 2003 the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in the United States reported 244 fatalities due to the inflation of an airbag. Of these cases, 143 involved children, 121 of these were babies not correctly restrained in a rear-facing safety restraint.²

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Although the injuries attributed to airbags in the United States have been serious, Australia does not appear to have experienced similar instances of casualties related directly to airbag inflation. Unfortunately there has been insufficient research into this area to date, however, there is no evidence of serious injury or death to children or adults in Australian vehicles so far.



In the view of the Department of Transport and Regional Services, the US problem with airbags is unlikely to occur in Australia because of a number of reasons, including design³. Australian airbags fire later and inflate with less force than in the US. Further, in Australia, child restraints are designed for use in rear seats, many of the deaths in the US have occurred when child restraints have been placed in the front passenger seat. Finally, there have been no reports of similar problems in Australia, with cars and child restraints having warning labels advising of the dangers.

Is there a Law or an Australian Standard for Airbags



The law (Australian Design Rule (ADR) 69/00, ADR 72/00 and ADR 73) requires all new passenger cars in Australia to comply with specific Design Rules, regardless of whether airbags are installed or not. There is no legal requirement obliging car manufacturers to install driver or passenger airbags⁴.

When airbags are fitted, Australia does not specify how an airbag must perform or function. However car manufacturers are bound by the provisions of the Trade Practices Act 1974 which prohibits the manufacture of goods that will or may cause injury to any person.



In NSW it is illegal to use a child restraint in a front passenger seat if there is a passenger airbag installed.

Remember:

The Children's Hospital at Westmead recommends that you use a weight and size appropriate restraint for your child from birth up to 26 kg, after which time they may use the adult seat belt. A suitable restraint will offer more protection for your child, in the event of a car accident.



- Never use a rearward-facing infant restraint in the front passenger seat.
- Never place a child aged 12 years or under in a front passenger seat if there is a passenger airbag installed.
- Children should, where possible, be placed in the back seat of your car. In the event of an accident, it is much safer to be seated in the back seat than in the front.
- Never place the shoulder strap of a seat belt behind the child's back or under the arm.
- Keep children at least 30 cm away from all airbags.
- Do not place toys, blankets and other objects between children and airbags; objects can move towards children if an airbag inflates.



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¹ Transport Canada, http://www.tc.gc.ca/mediaroom/includes/printable_backgrounder.asp?lang=en

² Stratbucker, W. and Green, C. Injury Prevention, *eMedicine*, 2006.

<http://www.emedicine.com/ped/topic3046.htm>

³ <http://www.dotars.gov.au/>

⁴ Department of Transport and Regional Services Australian Transport Safety Bureau, 2000, Effectiveness of ADR 69: A Case-Control Study of Crashed Vehicles Equipped with Airbags.

http://www.atsb.gov.au/publications/2000/pdf/Airbags_1.pdf