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disease prevention news

## The Air Bag That Can Save an Adult's Life Can Kill a Child

Air bags are designed to supplement the protection provided by safety belts in frontal crashes. Beginning in 1997, dual air bags became standard equipment in most new passenger vehicles sold in the United States. Federal safety standards require all new passenger cars and trucks to be equipped with both driver- and passenger-side air bags by 1999. While air bags have a good overall safety record and have saved an estimated 1,500 lives as of the end of 1996, they pose several risks, especially for children.

Air bags inflate at speeds up to 200 miles per hour, a force that can severely injure or kill passengers and drivers. The injuries that occur are caused by the inflating bag hitting the head and neck of an out-of-position rider or the inflating bag hitting the back of an infant seat behind the baby's head. There is no risk of a rider being smothered by the air bag, because the bag loses its air immediately after it inflates, so the fabric does not remain over the rider's face. People riding in the front seat who are most likely to be injured or killed by an inflating air bag are

- ◆ infants riding in rear-facing car seats
- ◆ children age 12 years and younger who are not properly secured in a size/age appropriate restraint system
- ◆ children and adults who are not buckled up
- ◆ riders who do not use the shoulder belt
- ◆ persons sitting too close to the steering wheel or dashboard so that they come into contact with the air bag before it is fully inflated

During a frontal impact, the rapidly inflating air bag can strike an infant safety seat with enough force to seriously injure or kill the infant. When parents learn that an air bag can harm a baby in a rear-facing infant seat, many think that placing the infant facing forward will take care of the problem. However, infants must **never** be in the front seat, regardless of the position of the safety seat. **The safest place for all children is correctly restrained in the back seat of the vehicle.**

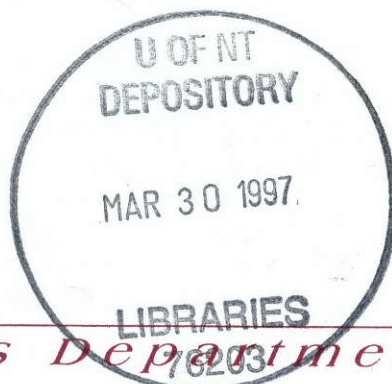
In addition, in spite of extensive media coverage of the importance of placing children under age 12 in the back seat, with proper safety restraints, cases continue to be reported of fatalities among children unrestrained or improperly restrained in the front seat. Tragically, surveys indicate that as many as 35% of young children ride completely unrestrained. Precrash braking may throw an unrestrained child against the dashboard at or near the passenger air bag location. When this happens, the inflating air bag and its plastic cover can violently impact the out-of-place child with such force that it can injure or even kill the child. According to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data, over 34 fatalities among children have been associated with air bags.

Improvements in safety technology both in motor vehicles and in safety seat design impact recommendations for riders. Current recommendations are as follows.

*Continued* ☞

*Also in this issue:*

- Subscription Reminder
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- Conference Registration Form





Regardless of whether a car has an air bag, ensure that all passengers ride safely by following these rules:

- ◆ All children under the age of 12 years should ride in the back seat.
- ◆ Make sure **everyone** is using the appropriate safety restraints.
- ◆ Infants must always ride in a rear-facing safety seat, placed in the rear of the car, until they weigh 20 pounds and are 1 year of age.
- ◆ Toddlers should ride in convertible seats until they weigh 40 pounds or are 40 inches tall.
- ◆ Preschool and early elementary school children should ride in a belt-positioning booster seat until they weigh 60 pounds.
- ◆ Older children must wear the lap belt low on the hips and the shoulder belt across the shoulder and collar bone.

*NEVER, place an infant in the front seat of a car with a passenger-side airbag.*

*Set a good example! Always wear your seat belt!*

## Identifying Vehicles With Air Bags

Vehicles with air bags have one or more of the following markings:

- ◆ the words "Air Bag" or the letters "SRS" or "SIR" (Supplemental Restraint System/Inflatable Restraint) on the steering wheel and dashboard panel
- ◆ a warning label on the sun visors, on the sides of the open door frame, or on the safety belt system
- ◆ a warning in the vehicle owner's manual



Prepared by Stephanie Christina, TDH Safe Riders Program.

Adapted from the 1996 National Highway Safety Administration flier, *The Air Bag That Saves Your Life Could Kill Your Child*, by Ricardo Martinez, MD.

*For more information regarding the proper use of air bags and other restraint systems, contact the Texas Department of Health (TDH) Safe Riders Program at (800) 252-8255. Free educational literature and technical consultations are available for both health care professionals and the public.*

*Cases involving air bag injuries and fatalities can be reported to Ken Rogers, Regional Director of the National Transportation Safety Board in Dallas, by calling (817) 885-6811 or to Vernon Roberts of the Washington office at (202) 314-6483.*

## February 15-19 is National Passenger Safety Week.

### Don't forget to send in your subscription renewal form by March 31!

If you have not received your renewal materials by now, please let us know. Write us at DPN, Texas Department of Health, 1100 West 49th Street, Austin, Texas 78756-3199, or call (512) 458-7677. To assure that your renewal form is processed correctly, **enter your personal account number in the appropriate space. NOTE: DO NOT use the Budget # printed at the top of your renewal form as your account number!** Your personal account number is printed right above your name on the envelope the renewal materials came in and on all mailing labels beginning with the January 6, 1997, issue. Also, be sure you have provided all the required information.



## **Perspectives in Public Health: Texas Department of Health (TDH) Quarterly CME Conference**

On March 7, 1997, from 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM, the Texas Department of Health (TDH) will present its Perspectives in Public Health: TDH Quarterly CME Conference. Designed for public health and primary care physicians, the conference will be held at the TDH Headquarters in Austin, Texas. The program will consist of lectures supplemented by audiovisual slide presentations.

After attending this conference, the participants will be able to

- ◆ prevent, detect at an early stage, treat, control, or take remedial action against specific medical conditions that may adversely affect the health of individuals and populations in Texas;
- ◆ identify policies, processes, and products that promote and protect the health of people and preserve environmental quality; and
- ◆ establish relationships with other physicians concerned with public health and preventive medicine issues through dialogue with presenters and other participants.

Topics covered at the upcoming conference include

- ◆ Commissioner's Hour: Medicaid at Age 31  
*Leonard J. Kirschner, MD, MPH, Vice President, Health Care Initiatives, State Health Care, Electronic Data Systems, Phoenix, Arizona*
- ◆ Will there be Another Cycle of Cyclosporiasis in Texas?  
*Herbert L. DuPont, MD, Chief, Internal Medicine, St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital, Houston, Texas*
- ◆ The Role of the Physician in Public Health: The "Volunteer" County Health Authority  
*Del Barker Stigler, MD, Bureson County and Caldwell City Health Officer, Private Practice, Caldwell, Texas*
- ◆ Medical Newsdesk  
*W. S. Riggins, Jr., MD, MPH, Regional Director, Public Health Region 8, Texas Department of Health, San Antonio, Texas*
- ◆ Current Trends in Drug & Alcohol Abuse in Texas  
*Jane C. Maxwell, MA, Director, Needs Assessment Department, Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, Austin, Texas*
- ◆ Putting Prevention Into Practice: What Can I Do for My Substance Abusing Patient?  
*Raymond Krych, PhD, Clinical Psychology, Program Director, Alcohol & Drug Dependence Treatment Program, Scott & White Clinic, Temple, Texas*

The Texas Department of Health designates this educational activity for up to 6 hours in Category 1 credit towards the AMA Physician's Recognition Award. Each physician should claim only those hours of credit that he/she actually spent in the educational activity. This program has been reviewed and is acceptable for 6 prescribed hours by the American Academy of Family Physicians.

The Texas Department of Health is accredited by the Texas Medical Association to sponsor continuing education for physicians.

For further information call: Public Health Professional Education - (800) 252-8239, press 4, or (512) 458-7677. To register, complete and return the registration form located on the back page of this issue.

