



## Driving Safety

### Mastering the Basics to Protect Yourself and Others While Driving

Despite how ubiquitous cars and other motor vehicles are in our day to day lives, driving, if not done safely, can lead to severe injuries and even death. In fact, injuries sustained from motor vehicle crashes are one of the leading causes of death for a wide range of people living in the U.S. (aged 1 – 54, according to the CDC). While car crashes can be deadly, there are things that we can do as individuals to help reduce our risk, improve our chances of survival, and make our roads safer for other drivers.

This article is the second in a series. Whereas the January edition focused on driving in dangerous conditions (caused by weather or glare), this month's article is about general safety tips for driving. Because driving is a large and multifaceted topic, this month's article will focus on three things: distracted driving, impaired driving, and the proper use of seatbelts, booster seats, and restraint-based safety features.

### Distracted Driving

Distracted driving, or doing anything during driving that takes your attention away from the road, has been increasing since the mid-2010's. In fact, in 2019 alone there were over 3,100 fatalities caused by car crashes involving a distracted driver, according to the CDC.

In general, there are 3 primary types of distracted driving:

1. **Visual distractions** take your eyes off the road. Examples include texting, adjusting navigation apps, reading, and others.
2. **Manual distractions** take your hands off the wheel. Examples include eating, drinking, and talking on a non-hands-free cell phone.
3. **Cognitive distractions** take your mind off driving. This is the broadest form of distraction.

All 3 distraction types can increase the risk of a car accident. At high speeds, those risks also translate to an increased risk of severe injury or death. Remember that taking your eyes off the road for a few seconds at 55 mph is akin to driving across the length of a football field while blind. Luckily, there are a number of things you can do to keep your attention on the road:

- Avoid multitasking while driving. Do not eat, drink, or talk on the phone while behind the wheel.
- Put your phone on silent, turn it off, or set it outside of reach while driving. If you must answer the phone or read a text, pull over to the side of the road where it's safe before doing so.
- Set up your navigation and entertainment apps *before* you drive, not during. If you must make an adjustment, pull over to the side of the road where it's safe before doing so.
- Properly secure your pets to avoid them creating a distraction.
- Invest in apps that reduce taking your attention away from the road.
- If you must discuss things with or manage children, pull over to the side of the road where it's safe before doing so.



## Impaired Driving

Impaired driving is whenever someone drives while under the influence of a substance that adversely affects their attention, reflexes, cognitive ability, or motor control. This can be anything from prescription drugs to illicit substances and alcohol. Like distracted driving, impaired driving can be deadly. In fact, the CDC estimates that as many as 32 people are killed per day because of involvement in a car accident caused by impaired driving. Therefore:

- If you anticipate that you will be drinking or taking recreational drugs, make sure you have a “designated driver” go with you. I.e., a person who will remain sober who can drive you home.
- If your friends are drunk or intoxicated, offer to drive them rather than letting them risk themselves on the road.
- Remember that while the legal limit for drinking is a blood alcohol level of 0.08%, even blood alcohol below that level can impair your ability.
- Alcohol and some drugs (prescription, illicit, and/or recreational) can impede your reaction time, motor control, decision making ability, or attention. Always check when taking prescription medication if you should avoid driving. If you must take such medication, arrange for an alternate means of transportation (like a designated driver, see above).
- If you’ve consumed alcohol, wait before you start driving. The specific amount of time you should wait depends on your age, amount of alcohol consumed, weight, and other factors. Just remember that if you feel different, you’ll drive different. It’s always better to be safe than sorry, so waiting too long is always better than not waiting long enough.



## Seatbelts and Booster Seats

While it’s becoming more ubiquitous as the years go by, it shouldn’t be understated just how many lives seatbelts save. The CDC estimates that in 2017, at least 15,000 deaths were prevented because the passengers of the vehicle were properly wearing their seatbelts. Wearing a seatbelt can significantly reduce the risk of serious injuries and death during a collision, and while airbags can supplement a seatbelt’s risk reduction, it can’t replace it. However, a seatbelt must be worn properly, and must fit the wearer. As a result, some accommodations (such as extenders or a booster seat) may be required for children or those whose proportions don’t match the default seatbelt provided by your car.

Remember, a seatbelt should be worn properly, and should also fit properly:

- All seatbelts should have a lap and shoulder belt. Some older cars only have a lap belt, so you should look into seeing if you can retrofit your car to include the more modern style of seatbelt.
- The lap belt should be placed across the pelvis. This means your hips, and not your stomach. If you are pregnant, make sure the seat belt is below your belly and across your hips/pelvis.
- The shoulder belt should be placed across your rib cage, i.e., the middle of your chest and away from your neck. Do not put it behind your back or under your arm.
- The car’s manufacturer may be able to provide extenders or adjusters for the default seatbelts, to ensure a proper fit.



For children, seatbelts typically do not provide a proper fit. As a result, children should be placed in an appropriate car seat for their safety. However, just like a regular seatbelt, a car seat has to be used correctly to be effective, and there is a broad range of car seat types.

The best way to proceed is to check in with a technician to make sure your car seat is installed correctly. The website below is provided by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security: [mass.gov/info-details/find-a-car-seat-inspection-site-near-you](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/find-a-car-seat-inspection-site-near-you).

For guidance regarding what sort of car seat to use, please see the infographic below provided by the CDC:

# Make sure your child is always buckled in a car seat, booster seat, or seat belt that is appropriate for their age and size.



### REAR-FACING CAR SEAT

#### Birth until age 2–4

Buckle children in a rear-facing car seat with a harness until they reach the maximum weight or height limit of their car seat. Keep children rear-facing as long as possible. Never place a rear-facing car seat in the front seat. Front passenger air bags can injure or kill young children in a crash.



### FORWARD-FACING CAR SEAT

#### After outgrowing rear-facing car seat and until at least age 5

When children outgrow their rear-facing car seat, they should be buckled in a forward-facing car seat with a harness and a top tether in the back seat until they reach the maximum weight or height limit of their car seat.



### BOOSTER SEAT

#### After outgrowing forward-facing car seat and until seat belt fits properly

When children outgrow their forward-facing car seat, they should be buckled in a booster seat in the back seat until the seat belt fits properly without a booster seat. Proper seat belt fit usually occurs when children are age 9–12.



### SEAT BELT

#### When seat belt fits properly without a booster seat

Children no longer need to use a booster seat when the seat belt fits them properly. A seat belt fits properly when the lap belt is across the upper thighs (not the stomach) and the shoulder belt is across the center of the shoulder and chest (not across the neck or face, and not off the shoulder).

### Keep children properly buckled in the back seat until age 13.

\*Recommended age ranges for each seat type vary to account for differences in child growth and weight/height limits of car seats and booster seats. Use the car seat or booster seat manual to check for important information about installation, the seat weight and height limits, and proper seat use.

Child passenger safety recommendations: American Academy of Pediatrics 2018.

[www.cdc.gov/transportationsafety/child\\_passenger\\_safety](https://www.cdc.gov/transportationsafety/child_passenger_safety)



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## References

**NHTSA Seat Belt Guidelines:** [nhtsa.gov/vehicle-safety/seat-belts#:~:text=What's%20the%20Right%20Way%20to,your%20hips%20and%20pelvic%20bone](https://www.nhtsa.gov/vehicle-safety/seat-belts#:~:text=What's%20the%20Right%20Way%20to,your%20hips%20and%20pelvic%20bone).

**Mass.gov on Car Seat Safety:** [mass.gov/car-seat-safety](https://www.mass.gov/car-seat-safety)

**AAA Car Seat Guidance:** [northeast.aaa.com/community/outreach/car-seat-installation.html](https://www.northeast.aaa.com/community/outreach/car-seat-installation.html)

**Car Seat Inspection Finder:** [mass.gov/info-details/find-a-car-seat-inspection-site-near-you](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/find-a-car-seat-inspection-site-near-you)

**NHTSA Booster Seat Guidelines:** [nhtsa.gov/vehicle-safety/car-seats-and-booster-seats#20536](https://www.nhtsa.gov/vehicle-safety/car-seats-and-booster-seats#20536)

**CDC Child Passenger Seat Safety:**  
[cdc.gov/transportationsafety/child\\_passenger\\_safety/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/transportationsafety/child_passenger_safety/index.html)

**AAA Impaired Driving Factsheet:** [exchange.aaa.com/safety/substance-impaired-driving/](https://www.exchange.aaa.com/safety/substance-impaired-driving/)

**AAA Distracted Driving Factsheet:** [exchange.aaa.com/safety/distracted-driving/](https://www.exchange.aaa.com/safety/distracted-driving/)

**Mass.gov Distracted Driving Factsheet:** [mass.gov/info-details/distracted-driving](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/distracted-driving)

**Mass.gov Impaired Driving Factsheet:** [mass.gov/info-details/impaired-driving](https://www.mass.gov/info-details/impaired-driving)

**CDC Distracted Driving Factsheet:** [cdc.gov/transportationsafety/distracted\\_driving/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/transportationsafety/distracted_driving/index.html)

**CDC Impaired Driving Factsheet:** [cdc.gov/transportationsafety/impaired\\_driving/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/transportationsafety/impaired_driving/index.html)