Air Bag Safety

Vehicle air bags (including front, side and head curtains) rapidly inflate to cushion and protect drivers and passengers in traffic accidents. Air bags have deployed 3.8 million times since first used in the 1980’s and have saved 5,000 lives. Installed in 56 million vehicles, the air bag is a supplemental vehicle safety device; the first line of defense is the seatbelt. The risk of death in an accident is reduced by 65% with seat belts alone; seat belt use in combination with an air bag reduces risk by an additional 15%.

Air bag benefits are proven, but most of us have seen the safety warnings posted in vehicles and heard the news that they can kill. To date, air bag deployment has killed 147 people due to the force of the airbag itself, not wearing a seatbelt, and sitting too close to the airbag. Air bags are not soft pillows; they are balloons of air that inflate with a blast of energy. Workers that drive on the job should be aware of the ways to increase air bag effectiveness for themselves and their passengers.

Drivers should review the vehicle owner’s manual to determine the type and location of the vehicle air bags. Drivers should wear shoulder and lap belts securely and move the seat back as far as possible and recline it slightly. This helps maintain at least 10 to 12 inches between the steering wheel air bag and the breastbone. Pedal extenders can help smaller adults maintain this distance. To reduce the risk of arm and hand injuries, drivers should hold the steering wheel from the sides (the traditional 10 o’clock and 2 o’clock positions). Tilting the steering wheel down directs the air bag deployment force away from the head and neck.

Passengers should always wear their lap and shoulder belts securely. Passengers in the front seat should move the seat as far back as possible and slightly recline it. Pregnant women, children age 13 and up, small statured adults (5 feet, two inches or shorter), adults with medical conditions, and the elderly may sit in the front seat with an air bag if they are securely belted, move the seat back, recline it slightly, and sit straight in the seat with feet on the floor. Those with eyeglasses and pacemakers can also sit by an air bag. All vehicle passengers should keep their arms and feet off of the air bag areas and avoid leaning against side impact air bags.

Drivers that transport children on the job should note the specific safety requirements for children and air bag safety. Infants and children should ride in the rear seat buckled up or secured in child safety seats appropriate for their age and weight.

Air bag fatalities are a rare occurrence, but with attention to safety precautions, we can all ensure that they save more lives than they take. For more information on air bag safety, visit the National Highway and Transportation Safety Association website at www.nhtsa.dot.gov.