Seat belts

- Failure to wear a seat belt is one of the leading causes of road crash death for crash-involved vehicle occupants.
- Unrestrained drivers and passengers are 8 times more likely to be killed in a road crash\(^1\).
- Wearing a properly adjusted seat belt reduces the risk of fatal or serious injury by up to 50\(^2\).

State of the Road A Fact Sheet of the Centre for Accident Research & Road Safety - Queensland (CARRS-Q)

THE FACTS

- The widespread use of seat belts following legislation and enforcement in the 1970s is regarded as a key factor in reducing the road toll from over 3,382 deaths in 1968 to around 2,887 deaths per year in 1988, in spite of increases in drivers and vehicles\(^3\).
- In 2015, 177 vehicle occupants who were not wearing a seat belt were killed in Australia, representing approximately 15% of all road crash fatalities\(^4\).
- In Queensland in 2016:
  - Unrestrained vehicle occupants accounted for 18 road fatalities or 15.4% of all vehicle occupant fatalities - a reduction of over 40% compared to both the previous year and the 5 year average\(^5\).
  - 178 hospitalised casualties (4.5% of all hospitalised casualties) were known to have been unrestrained - approximately 17% more than the previous year and 13% more than the previous 5 year average\(^6\).

Who is most at risk

- Young adults (18-24 years) are less likely to wear seat belts than older adults\(^7\).
- Men are less likely to wear seat belts than women and roughly twice as likely as women to be killed in road crashes for failing to wear a seat belt\(^8\).
- Rear seat passengers are less likely to wear a seat belt than front seat passengers, thus increasing the likelihood of injury to themselves and others in the vehicle\(^9\).
- Rural drivers.
- Indigenous car occupants are less likely to wear seat belts than non-Indigenous car occupants\(^10\).

Studies show that drivers & front seat passengers are at a much greater risk of fatality in a car crash if the rear passengers are not wearing seat belts\(^6\).

Why seat belts are effective

The five main functions of a seat belt are to:

1. Cause the occupant to decelerate at the same rate as the vehicle in a crash
2. Spread the force of the impact over the stronger parts of the occupant’s body (pelvis and chest area)
3. Prevent the occupant colliding with the interior parts of the vehicle and other vehicle occupants
4. Reduce the risk of being thrown from the vehicle
5. In modern cars, seat belts are designed to work together with the airbags. In a crash, the seat belt slows the speed of the occupant so they impact safely with the airbag.

Queensland legislation\(^11\)


- A bus driver is not responsible for ensuring passengers on the bus are wearing seat belts.
- Taxi drivers are now required to wear a seat belt at all times when operating the vehicle, and passengers in a taxi must also wear a seat belt at all times.
- Children aged under 7 years must use a child restraint suitable for their age (see [https://www.qld.gov.au/transport/safety/rules/children](https://www.qld.gov.au/transport/safety/rules/children)).
- Different types of restraints are available to suit children of different ages and sizes and these provide better protection to a child than seat belts used alone (as these are designed to fit an adult-sized body). A summary of the National Guidelines for Safe Restraint of Children Travelling in Motor Vehicles is available [here](https://www.qld.gov.au/transport/safety/rules/children).
- It is safer for children to be seated in the rear seat of a vehicle with a properly adjusted restraint. The law requires children under 4 years to be seated in the rear seat, and children 4-7 years may only be seated in the front if the rear seat is already filled with other younger children. Kidsafe Queensland provides a child restraint installation and checking service to ensure children are in the correct restraint for their age and size.

Children of different sizes & ages need different types of restraints.
Penalties for failing to wear a seat belt

Queensland penalties for failing to wear a seat belt (for motorists and passengers) are in effect.

- Driver failure to wear a seat belt when driving a vehicle fitted with seat belts = 3 demerit points + $378 fine.
- If you have a repeat offence within 12 months, the fine and demerit points are doubled.
- Passenger of at least 16 years failing to wear a seat belt in a vehicle fitted with seat belts (fine for the passenger) = 3 demerit points + $378 fine.
- Driver of a vehicle failing to ensure a passenger under 16 years wears an approved restraint or seat belt (without an exemption) = 3 demerit points + $378 fine for each unrestrained passenger.

CARRS-Q’S WORK IN THIS AREA

- Evaluation of the 2010 child passenger restraint legislation in Queensland was conducted in four locations in Queensland and found that nearly all children 0-7 years were restrained (95%), although approximately 24% of children were inappropriately restrained.
- Evaluation of the effectiveness of the announcement and enforcement of the new child restraint legislation in regional areas found an overall positive effect with fewer children observed seated in front seats and an increase in the use of dedicated child restraints.
- Child seating positions in passenger vehicles examined where drivers sit

When purchasing a car, consider its safety features - look for an ANCAP safety rating of 4 or 5 stars & ensure seat belts are in good operating condition.

REFERENCES


STATE OF THE ROAD is CARRS-Q’s series of Fact Sheets on a range of road safety and injury prevention issues. They are provided as a community service and feature information drawn from CARRS-Q’s research and external sources. See the reference list for content authors.

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