



**Need an Airbag  
On/Off Switch?  
Probably Not**

You've heard about airbags hurting people and may be thinking about getting on/off switches for the airbags in your car. The federal government now has procedures allowing the very few people who may be at risk of serious airbag injury to get switches, but these aren't appropriate for most people.

Are you possibly at risk of airbag injury? Is someone in your family? It isn't your size, gender, or age that determines risk. It's your position in relation to an airbag. Anyone who's very close to, or on top of, an airbag as it begins to inflate can be injured or killed. Most people who have been harmed by airbags weren't using safety belts or child restraints, and braking before impact caused them to move close to their airbags before inflation.

Once you understand the risks, weigh them against the benefits of airbags, which are important supplements to safety belts. Airbags and belts work together as a system, and one without the other isn't as effective. Together, they double the protection against head injury that's afforded by belts alone. The lives saved by airbags far outnumber the deaths they've caused.

So are you one of the few who's possibly at risk? Is your family? Probably not, but check the following guidelines to tell for sure.



**Only if it isn't possible to get at least 10 inches from the steering wheel should you consider an on/off switch. Even if you use a safety belt, sitting this close without an airbag puts your face at risk.**

## On the Driver Side

To avoid serious airbag injury risk, a driver of any size or age should always buckle up and sit at least 10 inches away from the steering wheel. The belted drivers potentially at risk are the very few who are positioned so the center of the chest is closer than 10 inches to the center of the steering wheel.

If you sit closer, try other options before seeking an airbag on/off switch. Why? Because without airbags, even belted drivers move forward in serious frontal crashes, and their faces often hit the steering wheel. Try a new seating position. Some drivers who lean forward need only sit back.

Only if it isn't possible to get back and away from the steering wheel should you consider an airbag on/off switch — for example, if you've tried but cannot comfortably drive while sitting back at least 10 inches. If you're a woman late in pregnancy who needs to drive and cannot

get your abdomen away from the steering wheel, you may wish to seek permission for an on/off switch based on medical need.

But remember that sitting close presents its own risks. Without an airbag, your face is likely to hit the steering wheel in a serious frontal crash.



**If you often transport too many kids to put them all in back and worry about keeping the child in front from getting too close to the passenger airbag, you may wish to consider getting an on/off switch.**

Most 1998 and later cars have redesigned airbags with less powerful inflators that reduce serious injury risk. In these cars, there's probably no need to get an on/off switch for your airbag even if you cannot get 10 inches from the steering wheel. Still, it's best to sit back and away from an airbag.

### **On the Passenger Side**

There's no significant airbag injury risk to properly belted adults sitting back in the seat. The risk on the passenger side is mostly to infants and children who are unrestrained or unbelted — and the remedy is usually as simple as properly restraining kids in a back seat. Sitting in back always was safer, even before airbags, and now it's more important because it keeps kids away from inflating airbags.

Never put a rear-facing restraint in front with a passenger airbag. The baby's head would be too close to the airbag. Instead, secure the infant restraint to the center back seat.

Should you ever consider an on/off switch for a passenger airbag? A switch so you can occasionally put a baby up front might seem like a good idea, but if you're in a hurry it's easy to forget about the switch. Besides, it's always safer to ride in back. So there's only a rare need for an on/off switch — for example, when an infant with medical problems requires constant observation and the driver is the only other person in the vehicle. Then there might be no choice except to put the baby up front, and a passenger airbag would present a risk. Of course, paying constant attention to a baby distracts from driving and involves its own risks.

What if you transport too many infants or small children to put them all in a back seat? It's okay for an older

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**It's safer to put kids in back. So there's only a rare need to switch off a passenger airbag — for example, when an infant with medical problems requires constant observation and the driver is the only adult in the car.**



child to ride up front, even with a passenger airbag, if the seat is all the way back and the child is secured in a lap/shoulder belt and sitting back in the seat. Sitting back is important because leaning forward to, for example, fiddle with radio dials can put a child's head close to the airbag. If you routinely transport too many kids to put them all in the back and worry about keeping the child up front sitting back and away from the passenger airbag, you may wish to get an on/off switch. If you do get one, remember to use it correctly. Remember to turn off the airbag when an infant or child must ride in front.

### **Making the Decision**

Don't discount airbag risks. Don't discount the benefits of airbags, either. If you're one of the very few for whom airbags may pose a risk, then an on/off switch may be appropriate. But remember how few people really need on/off switches and how easily they can be misused. And remember this: If you turn off your airbag, you'd be forgoing important protection in the event of a serious frontal crash. When you know the facts, it becomes clear that leaving airbags intact is almost always best.

**Airbags aren't alternatives to safety belts. Designed to work with belts, airbags provide additional protection, especially to people's heads and chests, in serious frontal crashes.**



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