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Air Bags and Safety: Consumers Ask Questions

Air bags are designed to keep your head, neck, and chest from slamming into the dash, steering wheel or windshield in a front-end crash. They are not designed to inflate in rear-end or rollover crashes or in most side crashes. Generally, air bags are designed to deploy when the severity of a crash reaches a preset threshold value. Depending on the specific vehicle model, this threshold is normally equivalent to a vehicle crashing into a solid wall at 13-23 km/hr. Air bags most often deploy when a vehicle collides with another vehicle or with a solid object like a tree.

However, Transport Canada has been receiving complaints from the public about injuries caused by air bags that inflate in low-speed collisions and about incidents in which air bags did not open when it seemed they should have.

Why Do Air Bags Sometimes Cause Injuries?

In order to protect the head and upper body in high-impact crashes, air bags must inflate so quickly, and with such force, that they can cause injuries. While most of these injuries are minor, consisting only of bruises and abrasions, some are more serious, such as broken arms. In extreme cases, such as when the head or chest is against the module when it opens, fatal injuries can result.

People who sit close to the steering wheel are at higher risk of being injured by a deploying air bag than those who sit further away. Small children are also very vulnerable. Children under the age of 12 should always be seated in the back of the vehicle and should be properly restrained. Never allow a child to sit or stand near the dashboard. In addition, never install a rearward-facing infant restraint system in a seat equipped with an air bag—if it deploys, the infant restraint system will be propelled into the back of the seat.

What Can We Expect of Air Bag Systems in the Future?

In order to reduce the incidence of air-bag-induced injury, motor vehicle manufacturers are developing "smart" air bags. Already some possess two thresholds of activation, one that is appropriate for a belted occupant and another, lower threshold, for an unbelted person. The next generation of air bag systems will probably have proximity sensors that gauge how close an occupant is to the air bag module and will be equipped with warning systems that signal when someone is too close—for instance, when a driver has fallen asleep and is slumped over the steering wheel. Some vehicles already have a manual cut-off switch that disables the passenger-side air bag when an infant restraint system is installed; in the future, automatic systems may prevent the air bag from deploying.

Most manufacturers have been installing depowered air bags starting on their model year 1998 vehicles. They are called "depowered" because they deploy with less force than current air bags. They will reduce the risk of air bag-related injuries. However, even with depowered air bags, rear-facing child seats still should never be placed in the front seat and children age 12 and under are still safest in the back seat. Contact your vehicle manufacturer for further information.

In the meantime, you can maximize the protection offered by current occupant restraint systems and reduce the risk of being injured by an air bag by taking the following precautions.



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New Guarantor Policy

On October 1, 2007, Passport Canada introduced a simpler guarantor policy, which will allow most Canadian adult passport holders to act as guarantors.

Under this new policy, to be a guarantor, a passport holder:

- Must hold a five-year Canadian passport that is valid or has been expired for no more than one year,
- May be a family member,
- May reside at the same address as the applicant,
- Must have known the applicant for at least two years, and
- Must be a Canadian citizen 18 years of age or older and must have been 16 years of age or older when they applied for their own passport.

By moving to a Canadian passport holder criterion for guarantor declarations, Passport Canada will be able to verify guarantor information from its own database, and will not have to rely on occupational directories.

For more information please see the following website
<http://www.ppt.gc.ca/index.aspx?lang=eng>

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