

Traffic accidents are leading cause of death for people aged 2-33

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reports that motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death in the U.S. for all people aged 2-33. In 2003, more than 42,000 people died as a result of motor vehicle accidents. Vehicle drivers and passengers accounted for 87 percent of all traffic fatalities, pedestrians accounted for another 11 percent, and pedalcyclists accounted for about 1.5 percent.

Fortunately, efforts to improve vehicle safety and to decrease accidents are paying off. For example, the number of traffic-related injuries and fatalities based on the number of vehicle miles traveled each year is at an all time low due the increased use of seat belts and other safety improvements. Also, the annual number of fatalities per 100,000 people in the population has decreased from 15.6 in 1994 to 14.6 in 2003.

Protecting vehicle occupants

Driver and passenger restraints—Being ejected from a vehicle is one of the worst things that can happen to a person in a crash. In fatal crashes in 2002, 73 percent of passenger vehicle occupants who were totally ejected from the vehicle were killed. Only 1 percent of occupants who were using restraints were ejected compared to 30 percent of unrestrained occupants.

Researchers have found that, when used, lap/shoulder belts reduce the risk of fatal injury to front seat occupants of passenger cars by 45 percent. In 2002, safety belts saved an estimated 14,000 lives. If everyone had worn a seat belt, an additional 7,000 lives could have been saved.

Researchers have also found that child safety seats in passenger vehicles reduce fatal injuries to infants by 71 percent and to toddlers by 54 percent.

Airbags—Beginning in model year 1998, all new passenger cars were required to have driver and passenger air bags. The NHTSA estimates that air-bags reduce fatalities in accidents by 12 percent. More than 2,200 lives were saved by air bags in 2002. Because air bags were designed as supplemental protection and were not designed to deploy in all crashes, lap/shoulder restraints should always be used in vehicles, even those with air bags.

Note that children in rear-facing car seats should not be placed in the front seat of vehicles equipped with passenger side air bags. The impact of a deploying air bag could injure the child. NHTSA also recommends that children under 13 years old sit in the rear seat away from the force of a deploying air bag.

Protecting motorcyclists

Helmets are estimated to be 29 percent effective in preventing fatalities among motorcyclists. The NHTSA estimates that helmets saved the lives of nearly 700 motorcyclists in 2002. If all motorcyclists had worn helmets, an additional 450 lives could have been saved.

Protecting pedalcyclists

According to a study for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, wearing a helmet is the single most effective countermeasure available to reduce head injuries and fatalities resulting from bicycle crashes. Bicycle helmets are 85-88 percent effective in mitigating head and brain injuries in all types of bicycle incidents.

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Sources: The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration