

Safety belt usage up, traffic patrols on

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National & Statewide "Click It or Ticket" effort focuses on full-time use of proper restraints

Oregonians are buckling up in record numbers: the state just moved up one notch for safety belt usage to number three in the nation at 94.1 percent. But that's no reason to relax, according to Carla Levinski, Occupant Protection Program manager for the Oregon Department of Transportation. Now the focus shifts to part-time belt users and increasing the use of booster seats.

"We have to be diligent about reminding people that everyone needs to be belted in properly, and that includes putting children in the proper safety seats," said Levinski. "We only have about 52 percent compliance with booster seat laws." Oregon law requires that children under four years of age or weighing less than 40 pounds be restrained in child seats. Children over four or weighing more than 40 pounds must use booster seats until they attain six years of age and weigh at least 60 pounds. From May 21 to June 3, traffic patrols will step up efforts to enforce safety belt laws during the national "Click It or Ticket" campaign. Local police departments, sheriff's offices and Oregon State Police will focus on booster seat use, prohibition of minors under 18 from riding in the open bed of pickup trucks, and safety belt use by occupants of taxis, shuttles, limos and other vehicles for hire which carry fifteen or fewer passengers. "Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death and disability for all Americans age one through 34, according to the National Centers for Disease Control," Levinski said. "If everyone in Oregon buckled up last year, about 75 lives could have been saved." "Click It or Ticket" is a national traffic enforcement mobilization funded by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration through ODOT's Safety Division. Over the same period, the region's "Three Flags Campaign" will be in effect, allowing law enforcement agencies in Oregon, Washington and British Columbia to join together for a two-week, high-visibility safety blitz. In addition, a national campaign called OPERATION C.A.R.E. (Combined Accident Reduction Effort) will run from May 25 to 28. All of these efforts have the same goal: reduce crashes and the resulting injuries and deaths. "Regular safety belt use is the single most effective way to protect people and reduce fatalities in motor vehicle crashes," said Levinski. "It's really simple - buckle up properly every time, every trip." Safety belt stats

Nationwide, it is estimated that 81% of front seat passengers in cars and 74% in pickup trucks regularly wear their safety belts, but Oregonians do much better. Oregon has the nation's 3rd-highest "observed" belt use rate for drivers of passenger cars at 94.1%, Other states ranking in the top five are Washington 96.3%,

Michigan 94.3%, California 93.4% and Hawaii 92.5%. While state-by-state use rates for pickups are not monitored by USDOT, Oregon is believed to have the highest state rate among pickup drivers at 90%.

Since passage of Oregon's adult belt law in 1990, motor vehicle crash fatality and injury rates have both decreased by 43% as belt use has doubled from 50% to 97% (all seating positions.)

A consistent one-third of Oregon's traffic deaths are attributed primarily to lack of safety belt use. Most others involve a combination of no belt use, excessive speed, and impaired, inattentive or aggressive driving.

During 2005, forty percent of Oregon's total crash fatalities were not belted. Forty percent of children in crashes and under age eight were either unrestrained, held on laps, or restrained in adult belt systems rather than in appropriate child safety seats or boosters.

Part of the reason for higher fatality rates among unbelted occupants is the likelihood and consequences of ejection. Unbelted or improperly belted occupants are five times more likely to be ejected in a crash than one who is belted and odds of surviving an ejection are estimated at one in four.

Oregon laws

Oregon law requires that all motor vehicle operators and passengers be properly secured with a safety belt or safety harness. This means that both parts of a lap and shoulder belt system must be worn together, only one person per belt, and no placement of the shoulder belt behind the back or under the arm. Any of these situations places the vehicle occupant at severe risk of internal crash injury.

Children under 4 years of age OR weighing less than 40 pounds must be restrained in child seats.

Children over 4 OR weighing more than 40 pounds must use booster seats until they attain 6 years of age AND weigh at least 60 pounds.

Occupants of commercial vehicles used for the transportation of persons for compensation or profit and which transport 15 or fewer persons are required to use safety restraints. This applies to occupants of such vehicles as shuttles, taxis, limousines and vans. Among these types of vehicles, taxi cab drivers are the only occupants excepted from this law.

Minors " anyone under the age of 18 " are prohibited from riding in the open bed of a pickup unless traveling in the scope of employment or between hunting camps.

Back seat recommended for children

While it is not the law in Oregon, it is strongly recommended that children aged twelve and under ride in rear seating positions. Research indicates that such rear seating reduces the risk of injury by 37 percent for that age group.

For more information about traffic safety, visit www.oregon.gov/ODOT/TS/safetybelts.shtml.

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