

INSURANCE INSTITUTE FOR HIGHWAY SAFETY

NEWS RELEASE

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TURNING OFF AN AIRBAG 'ALMOST NEVER MAKES SENSE,' VERY FEW DRIVERS OR PASSENGERS NEED SWITCHES

ARLINGTON, VA — Responding to today's U.S. Department of Transportation decision to allow some motorists to get on/off switches for their airbags, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety President Brian O'Neill says "we hope this doesn't result in large numbers of people getting switches because only a small minority of motorists are at risk of serious injury from inflating air-bags. Nearly all drivers and passengers can virtually eliminate this risk by buckling up and positioning themselves properly in the vehicle. So there's no need to get a switch. Turning off an airbag almost never makes sense."

Airbags have saved more than 2,500 lives so far, and they've prevented hundreds of thousands of serious injuries. But they've caused a number of deaths, which has led to apprehension about airbags among motorists who aren't at any risk at all. "Restraint use and position determine risk," O'Neill explains. "Only someone who is very close to, or on top of, an airbag as it first begins to inflate is at risk of serious inflation injury. Usually this means unbelted adults or unrestrained children who have moved forward during braking before the impact."

Avoiding Airbag Inflation Injury Risk without On/Off Switches

"Very few belted drivers need to consider on/off switches," O'Neill says. "Always buckling up and sitting back and away from the steering wheel at least 10 inches mean the airbag poses no significant risk. And for most drivers, achieving the 10-inch distance is easy. If you switch off a driver airbag, you obviously eliminate any risk from the bag itself, but you give up important potential protection because, even if you use a belt, in a serious frontal crash your face almost cer-

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tainly will hit the steering wheel. This is especially true for drivers sitting close to the wheel."

On the passenger side, O'Neill explains, "airbags pose virtually no risk to adults who use safety belts, but infants and children can be at risk. A rear-facing infant restraint puts a baby's head too close to an airbag, so infants should always ride in a back seat. The center back is safest for infants. The back is best for older children, too. This way, youngsters of all ages are out of the way of inflating airbags."

If an older child has to ride up front, "an airbag still doesn't necessarily pose a risk," O'Neill notes. "If the seat is pushed back and the child is buckled up and sitting back in the seat, the passenger airbag poses no risk."

Who Should Consider On/Off Switches

Given these alternatives, O'Neill points out, "airbag on/off switches make sense in only a very few cases. On the driver side, this would be only when a motorist cannot get at least 10 inches from the steering wheel. Most 1998 models will have redesigned airbags with less powerful inflators, so an even closer position shouldn't pose a risk. On the passenger side, on/off switches make sense only when there's no choice but to transport an infant in the front seat for medical reasons or if there are too many children to put them all in back and the driver is concerned about keeping an older child riding up front from leaning forward and getting too close to an airbag."

O'Neill adds that "the federal government's new policy of allowing on/off switches is important for those few people who may be at risk. But most motorists shouldn't bother with switches."

Video news release 2:00-2:30 p.m. EST: Galaxy 9/Transponder 22 VNR includes airbag footage, SOTs Institute President Brian O'Neill 3 consumer brochures explain airbag benefits and risks, point to few circumstances when motorists should consider on/off switch, and tell how to transport children in airbag cars without injury risk. Copies of three brochures: P.O. Box 1420, Arlington, VA 22210 Related information on the Internet: <http://www.highwaysafety.org>.