

# Traffic Safety Facts

## Traffic Tech – Technology Transfer Series

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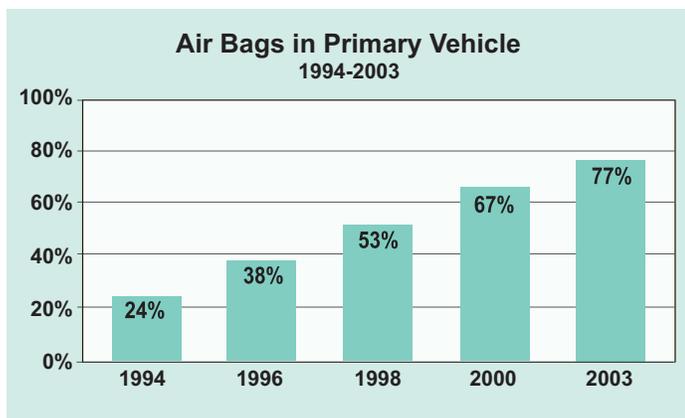
June 2005

### THERE IS BROAD SUPPORT FOR AIR BAGS, DESPITE SAFETY CONCERNS

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) conducts a national telephone survey approximately every two years to monitor the public's attitudes, knowledge, and self-reported behavior regarding occupant protection devices (safety belts, child restraints, air bags). The 2003 survey consisted of two questionnaires, each administered to a randomly selected sample of about 6,000 persons age 16 and older. Interviewing ran from January 8, 2003 to March 30, 2003.

#### More Than Three Out Of Four Primary Vehicles Have Air Bags

The percentage of drivers with air bags in their primary vehicles has continued to increase. In 2003, 77 percent reported air bags in their primary vehicles, compared to 67% in late 2000. Usually the vehicle had an air bag in front of both the driver and front seat passenger (63 percent) as opposed to driver only (12 percent). Seven percent of vehicles had air bags in other locations within the vehicle as well. Some persons were unsure as to the presence or location of air bags in their motor vehicles.

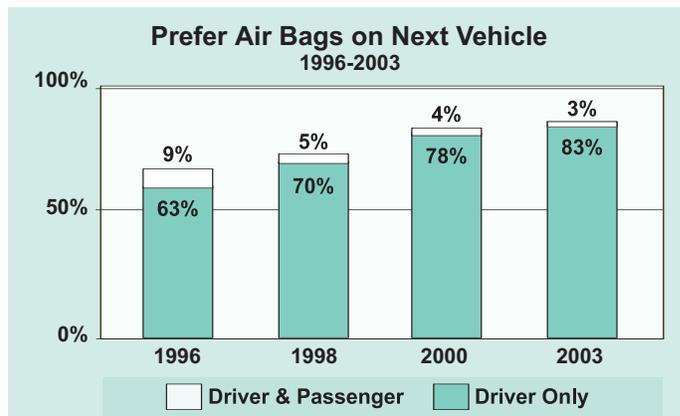


**Qx:** Does the (car/truck/van) you normally drive have an air bag?

**Base:** Drivers whose primary vehicle is not a motorcycle

#### Preference For Air Bags

Most of the public (\* 87 percent) said they would prefer to have air bags in their next vehicle, and another 4 percent were unsure. The percentage has been steadily rising since 1996, when the question was first asked. In 1996, 72 percent said they would prefer air bags in their next vehicle.



**Qx:** Would you prefer that your next vehicle have driver air bags only, driver and passenger air bags, or no air bags?

**Base:** Total Population Age 16+

\* The percentages in the figure are rounded

More than half the population (53 percent) said they felt safer in motor vehicles with air bags than in motor vehicles without air bags. Most others said they felt about the same (38 percent). Five percent felt less safe and 4 percent were unsure. Nearly nine-in-ten persons believed an air bag would provide either a lot (36 percent) or some (53 percent) protection in a crash involving major motor vehicle damage.

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## **Air Bags Do Not Substitute For Safety Belt Use**

Air bags and safety belts are two parts of a vehicle's passenger safety system. Safety experts emphasize that drivers and passengers should always wear their safety belts, regardless of whether or not the vehicle contains an air bag. The overwhelming majority of the public (95 percent) knew that the presence of air bags does not substitute for safety belt use. The percentage was slightly higher among drivers who had air bags in their motor vehicles (97 percent). Also, reported belt use was higher among drivers having air bags in their primary vehicles: 85 percent said they used safety belts "all the time" while driving as opposed to 80 percent of drivers not having air bags.

## **Safety Concerns About Air Bags**

Even though 87 percent of the public would prefer an air bag in their next vehicle, many (43 percent) still expressed concerns about the safety of air bags. Females (47 percent) were more likely to have safety concerns than were males (37 percent). When asked what concerns they had, the respondents tended to refer specifically to injuries from air bags, or else describe some functional characteristic of the air bag that they considered a safety issue. Many of those having concerns explicitly mentioned injuries to children (26 percent) or to adults (37 percent).

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## **Likelihood Of Injury**

The majority of the public believed that an adult sitting in the front seat would somewhat likely or very likely be injured by an air bag that deployed in a normal manner. However, they were more likely to believe that an injury would occur if the adult was unbelted (78 percent) rather than wearing a safety belt (53 percent). Children were considered particularly vulnerable to injury from air bags, with 85 percent believing a small child sitting in the front seat would very likely (64 percent) or somewhat likely (21 percent) be injured by an air bag opening normally.

## **Car Seats**

The 2003 survey asked a detailed set of child car seat questions to a sub-sample of parents of children under age 9, and non-parents living with children under age 9 who at least sometimes drove with those children. The questions were asked of those members of the sub-sample for whom a specific child was identified that was using a child car seat. Almost all (99 percent) knew that the back seat is the safest place in the vehicle to place a child's car seat. Yet, 6 percent still usually placed the car seat in the front. The percentage dropped to 3 percent if the respondent's primary vehicle had a passenger frontal air bag. Most (92 percent) knew that it was unsafe to place a rear-facing car seat in the front seat of a motor vehicle having a passenger air bag. However, 3 percent erroneously believed it was safe and 4 percent were unsure.

## **HOW TO ORDER**

For a copy of *2003 Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey (Volume III: Air Bags Report)* write to the Office of Research and Technology, NHTSA, NTI-130, 400 Seventh Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20590 or send a fax to (202) 366-7096 or download [www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov).