

Experts: *Put Kids in Back Seat of Car*

WASHINGTON - Safety advocates are praising smart air bags, which turn themselves off or deploy softly if they sense a driver or passenger is too small. But they say it's still a lot smarter for drivers to put small passengers in the back seat.

Automakers, in compliance with new federal standards, will begin phasing in the new air bags next Monday, installing them in 20 percent of new vehicles. The new systems, which have weight sensors in the front seats to detect whether drivers or passengers are too small to withstand the force of an air bag, will be in all new vehicles by Sept. 1, 2006.

Advocates and federal safety officials applauded the change Wednesday but also issued a warning.

"We want to make sure parents are clear: Old air bag, new air bag, no air bag, kids are safer in the back seat properly restrained," said Ellen Engleman, chairwoman of the National Transportation Safety Board.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, there have been 231 confirmed deaths due to air bags since 1990, including 144 children.

While air-bag deaths have been steadily declining since 1998 as more drivers put children in the back seat, a NHTSA survey last year found that 15 percent of infants, 10 percent of 1- to 3-year-olds and 29 percent of 4- to 7-year-olds were still riding in the front seat.

The Air Bag and Seat Belt Safety Campaign estimates that the lives of 1,700 children have been saved since 1996 because they were sitting in the back seat. The group's survey was based on accident data from 1996 through 2001.

Automakers agree that the advanced air bags are not the answer for small children.

"This is just a safety net, not a primary means for keeping our children safe," said Scott Schmidt of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, which represents ten automakers.

Automakers were allowed to meet the regulations in several ways. They could install air bags that would not deploy if sensors showed the occupant was too small, or they could install air bags that would deploy at a lower speed if the occupant was too small.

So far, Ford Motor Co. is the only automaker in the Big Three who is installing the technology in cars. The 2004 Ford Taurus and Mercury Sable have advanced air bags, said Jim Boland, manager of advanced safety for Ford.

General Motors Corp. has advanced air bags in its 2003 and 2004 pickups and sport utility vehicles.

DaimlerChrysler AG is installing the technology in the 2004 Jeep Liberty and Dodge Durango, spokeswoman Angela Ford said.

NHTSA, <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov>

Air Bag and Seat Belt Safety Campaign, <http://www.nsc.org/airbag.htm>

Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, <http://www.autoalliance.org>