

Newborn Care: Car Seat Safety

Leaving the hospital with your newborn is exciting and maybe a little nerve-racking. Car accidents, even minor ones, can cause serious injury to a newborn. To avoid injury to your newborn when traveling by car, always use a car seat. Even for short trips. You will need one when you leave the hospital.

When choosing a car seat, make sure to choose one that is appropriate for your baby's age and size. Some infant seats will not work for newborns less than 5 pounds. If you are inheriting a car seat, or buying one that has already been used, make sure the car seat: Is less than 6 years old; Hasn't been recalled; Has no visible damage or missing parts; Comes with an instruction manual; And has never been in a car crash.

Car seats must be installed according to the manufacturer's directions. All vehicles and car seats are different. Be sure to read the instructions on your car seat and in your vehicle's owner's manual before installing it. Never put your infant in the front passenger seat. An air bag that opens can seriously injure or kill a baby or child.

When installing a car seat for a newborn, always place it in the back seat, in the rear facing position. A baby's head is large and heavy, but his neck muscles and spine are just developing. During a frontal crash, the most common type of crash, a car seat in the rear-facing position can better cushion and protect the baby's head, neck and spine from the force of the impact.

In fact, toddlers should remain in a rear-facing car seat until they reach the height and weight recommendations of their car seat. To further protect your baby's head, you can use the attachable headrest for extra support, but for safety, only use the headrest that comes with your baby's car seat.

When harnessing your baby into a car seat, make sure the shoulder strap or harness is threaded through the slot at or below the level of the child's shoulders. The straps must fit snugly with no twists.

Place the chest clip even with your baby's armpits – not at her neck or stomach, to make sure she is properly harnessed. To keep your baby warm, harness your baby into the car seat first and then add a blanket. Adding bulky clothing or swaddling before strapping your baby in can reduce safety.

And never leave your baby alone in a car - even for a short amount of time. Temperatures inside a car can rise quickly and your baby doesn't have the ability to cool himself down. Your baby can suffer serious damage, or even die, from being left in a car. Develop a system to remind yourself that your baby is in the car – and take her out of the car with you, every time.

As your baby grows, she will move from an infant car seat to a convertible car seat and eventually to a booster seat. At each step along the way, follow the safety guidelines to protect your child in a car.