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Newspaper Column

When it comes to wearing your seat belts, some motorists may believe that they are protected by the size of their vehicle, their seating position, or where they are driving. Truth is that wearing a seat belt is the best way to protect yourself and your passengers in a crash. Fortunately, most Texans now buckle up, but some groups of motorists still aren't taking the message to heart and are not consistently using seat belts. Here are some myths about wearing a seat belt.

Vehicle type: There seems to be a misconception among those who drive and ride in pickup trucks that their large vehicles will protect them more than other vehicles in crashes. But the numbers say otherwise. Sixty-three percent of pickup truck occupants who were killed were not buckled up. That is compared to 43% of passenger car occupants who were killed while not wearing their seat belts. Regardless of vehicle type, seat belt use is the single-most effective way to stay alive in a crash.

Seating position: Too many people wrongly believe they are safe in the back seat unrestrained. Half of all front-seat occupants killed in crashes in 2012 were unrestrained, but 61% of those killed in back seats were unrestrained.

Rural versus urban locations: People who live in rural areas might believe that their crash exposure is lower, but in 2013, there were 13,038 crash fatalities in rural locations, compared to 8,079 crash fatalities in urban locations. Out of those fatalities, 51% of those killed in rural locations were not wearing their seat belts, compared to 46% in urban locations.

While 9 out of 10 Texans buckle up, too many drivers and passengers continue to risk injury or death by not using seat belts. In 2014, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) reported 2,587 motor vehicle crashes in Texas in which unrestrained vehicle occupants sustained fatal or serious injuries. Almost 3,500 (3,497) traffic deaths occurred in Texas in 2014 - up 3% from 2013. In 2014, of all people killed in vehicles in Texas, 44% were reported as not wearing a seat belt at the time of the crash.

After so many years of having seat belts standard in vehicles, it would seem that buckling your seat belt before driving off would be second nature. Fortunately, most of us do buckle up; but some, especially pickup truck drivers and their passengers, depend on their bigger pickup truck to protect them in a crash. Yet, pickup trucks are twice as likely to rollover as passenger cars, and pickup truck crashes can be especially serious – even deadly – due to their tendency to rollover and for unbelted occupants to be thrown from the vehicle.

Unbuckled passengers can also be deadly to others in the vehicle. Most people are not aware of the dangers posed by unbuckled backseat passengers. In a crash, they can become projectiles that are tossed around inside the vehicle, injuring or killing those in the front seat. Riders in the back seat who use lap and shoulder belts are 44% more likely to survive in a crash than unrestrained occupants in passenger cars, and 73% more likely to survive in passenger vans and SUVs.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), young adults are dying at a disproportionate rate because they are not wearing their seat belts. In 2014, 293 teen drivers and passengers (ages 15-20) died as a result of traffic crashes in Texas. Of those fatalities, 134 (46%) were not wearing their seat belts at the time of the crash.

When the “Click It or Ticket” campaign began in 2002, just 76% of Texans used seat belts. Today, more than 90% of Texans buckle up. NHTSA estimates that from 2002 to 2014, the campaign in Texas has resulted in over 4,300 fewer traffic fatalities (4,317), while preventing almost 73,000 serious injuries (72,926), and saving \$16.7 billion dollars in related economic costs.

Here’s another good reason to buckle up – it’s the law! Unbelted drivers and adult passengers can face fines and court costs of up to \$200. Children younger than 8 years old must be in a child safety seat or booster seat unless they are taller than 4 feet 9 inches. Fines issued to drivers for unrestrained children in their vehicle can be as high as \$250 plus court costs.

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service - Rusk County reminds drivers that the “Click It or Ticket” campaign this year is scheduled for May18-31, which includes Memorial Day weekend. During this time, extra law enforcement representatives will be on the roads enforcing the seat belt and child restraint laws in an effort to save lives. Those officers are not out to write tickets but instead want to help prevent the needless tragedy from motor vehicles accidents. Remember to buckle up and save your life – not just during Click It or Ticket, but every day of the year!

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