

seat belts for Larger passengers

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Large drivers demand safety belts fit for all

Car restraints built on health data 40 years out of date

By David Kiley, USA TODAY

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Most car companies can't get enough customers. But Honda says it "practically begged" Elizabeth Fisher to buy one of its competitors' cars instead of the Odyssey minivan she wanted.

Fisher shopped dozens of new cars and minivans last year looking for one that she would feel comfortable driving. The Baton Rouge computer programmer is a large woman, so fitting comfortably behind the wheel is an important issue.

She opted for the hot-selling Odyssey for its ample room. But when it came to fastening the seat belt, Fisher could barely get it closed. And when she tried out the rear seats where a few of her zaftig friends would be frequent passengers, the belts wouldn't close at all.

Most carmakers offer seat belt extenders similar to those on airplanes. But not Honda. American Honda Motor spokesman Art Garner says company representatives told Fisher that they can't vouch for the performance of a seat belt extender in a crash and encouraged her to go elsewhere. Volkswagen, Subaru, Isuzu, Porsche, Kia and Hyundai do not offer extenders for the same reason.

Auto safety awareness has never been higher. Forty-nine states have mandatory seat belt laws, and police are increasingly ticketing unbelted drivers.

And Americans are heavier and larger than ever, so more people are finding belts that meet today's federal standard difficult, if not impossible, to wear.

Fisher bought her Odyssey despite Honda's reluctance. But frustrated by what she views as Honda's and the government's insensitivity to large people, she is crusading to make sure anyone who can comfortably fit behind the wheel of a car has the ability to fasten a factory-installed or otherwise government-tested safety belt.

She gathered signatures and filed a petition with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in April, asking it to review standards for seat belts.

"The whole country is pushing seat belt usage, but there are a lot of larger people who are not being looked after," says Fisher. "That's unacceptable."

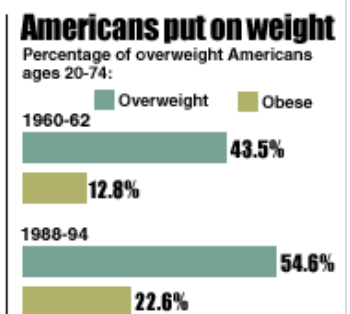
NHTSA says belts must fit around the standard crash dummy in the most forward sitting position, plus 4 inches. The dummy, based on 1960 statistics, represents what NHTSA says is the 95th percentile male. In other words, at about 6 feet and 215 pounds, the dummy is supposed to be big enough to represent 95% of American males and 99% of American females.

Data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from 1988 to 1994 and reported in the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey show the 95th percentile man is now 244 pounds, while the female is 226 pounds.

NHTSA acknowledges that it hasn't tested extenders. But it sees no obstacle to offering an extender, and says there is nothing preventing automakers from offering longer belts, as many, but not all, do.

NHTSA spokesman Tim Hurd says more recent health statistics have not prompted the agency to change the standard.

Some groups appear to be especially hurt by the old standard. The 95th percentile for non-Hispanic black females, 40-49, is 276 pounds; it is about 250 pounds for black women in their 30s and 50s. The 95th percentile for white males 40-49 is 256 pounds.



Hurd says NHTSA, which has received Fisher's petition, is reviewing the issue and should have comment by the end of August.

Ticketed for not wearing belt

Lisa Brounstein, an actress and plus-size model in Los Angeles, is eager to see the results. She got a ticket last year from a police officer who scolded her for not wearing the belt in her 1992 Honda Civic. Brounstein, who cannot fasten her belt, fought the ticket, but got no slack from traffic court either. She does not want to be forced to sell her paid-for, otherwise reliable car.

The actual number of people who are large enough to be affected is elusive, as is the number of people in the USA who are above a given weight. But J. Baker, the leading retailer of men's big and tall apparel through the Casual Male and Repp chains, says the market for its clothing last year was \$5.6 billion. Of that, 10% of sales were in size 4X and larger, sizes that easily put men into a tight squeeze in a minimum standard seatbelt.

"We can assume that there are tens of thousands of people, if not hundreds of thousands, who fall outside the NHTSA standard and aren't wearing belts because they are too tight or don't fit at all," says Sandie Sabo, spokeswoman for the National Association for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance.

Advocates say the issue isn't the number of people affected, but rather that manufacturers should be required to provide a belt for whoever is capable of riding in their cars.

Extenders don't please everyone

Sabo, who uses a belt extender in her 1990 Lincoln Town Car, says extenders for all cars will suffice for now but aren't a permanent fix.

"Some large people would simply feel too embarrassed to request an extender from a car dealer — and frankly, they shouldn't have to," she says.

General Motors, Ford Motor and DaimlerChrysler provide seat belt extenders. And while admitting that the length of seat belts varies from model to model, all three said their engineers are positive that people are better off belted with an extender than going without.

Ford safety spokesperson Sara Tatchio says Ford, Mercury and Lincoln brands exceed the NHTSA standard for seat belt length by 12 inches in some models and more than that in rear seats where belts are configured differently.

Volvo, now part of Ford and historically the industry leader in safety, supplies customers with an extender upon request. But Volvo spokesman Dan Johnston says the company asks its customers to sign a waiver that says they understand that the extender is meant only for the recipient and that it may not perform as well as the factory-installed belt in a crash.

"It is because there has not been any testing done that we know of for belt extenders to see how they affect the belt's performance in a crash," he says. "But we feel confident that people are better off being buckled with an extender than going without."

Mercedes-Benz says it uses a dummy that is larger than the NHTSA standard and offers a modified belt that is about 12 inches longer than the standard belt for those who request it. "We prefer this approach as there has not been adequate testing done on extenders to suit us," says Mercedes spokesman Fred Heiler.

BMW says it won't supply extenders, but, at the customer's expense, it refits the car with a longer belt. Jaguar has a similar policy, but absorbs the cost. Korea's Daewoo has just completed a series of tests on extenders and is offering them with 2001 models.

Isuzu, like Honda, says that it will not modify a safety system with a device that is not adequately tested.

"That's unacceptable to us," says Isuzu spokesman David Fults. "By putting an extender on a seat belt, you modify both the belt system and the air bag system because of how far the person will be away from the air bag when the belt tightens in a crash."

"I can't see any discernible reason why any manufacturer would not offer an extender," says Phil Haseltine, president of the Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety, a group funded by the automakers. "Given the potential numbers of people involved, NHTSA is right to be looking at this."

A grass-roots movement

Valerie Starrett is helping spread the word about Fisher's petition to a group of several hundred large people she organized in Seattle. In an accident 13 years ago, Starrett's head hit the windshield of her 1970s model Dodge Challenger. She was 230 pounds then and 35 weeks pregnant. She and her unborn baby survived despite the fact that her car's outdated lap belt wouldn't fit.

"I know that I was riding in an old car and that cars are better today, but the experience changed me," says Starrett. "We have these size-acceptance groups because we face a lot of adversity and discrimination."

Safety advocates and the government have acknowledged the need to make sure car safety devices protect children, the elderly, short people and pregnant women. Why haven't large people been part of the conversation? Chuck Hurley of the National Safety Council, who admits his organization has "certainly not had this on our screen yet," says, "Maybe they need a better lobby."

Responds Fisher, "The last person I talked to at Honda said there was literally 'nothing I could do to make Honda change its policy.' ... I took that as a challenge."

Seat belt extender policies aren't uniform

Offer extenders:

- ▶ General Motors brands: Cadillac, Buick, Oldsmobile, Pontiac, Chevrolet, GMC, Saturn
- ▶ Ford brands: Ford, Mercury, Lincoln
- ▶ Chrysler brands: Chrysler, Plymouth, Jeep
- ▶ Toyota/Lexus
- ▶ Nissan/Infiniti
- ▶ Mazda
- ▶ Mitsubishi

Offer extenders with caveat:

- ▶ Volvo
- ▶ Saab

Offer no extenders:

- ▶ Honda
- ▶ Subaru
- ▶ Kia
- ▶ Hyundai
- ▶ Isuzu
- ▶ Porsche
- ▶ Volkswagen/Audi

Offer only customized longer belts:

- ▶ Mercedes-Benz
- ▶ BMW
- ▶ Jaguar
- ▶ Land Rover