



seat belts for Larger passengers

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Baton Rouge woman turns up heat on Honda over seat belts

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Elizabeth Fisher of Baton Rouge has gone to great lengths to convince Honda to extend its seat belts. She has made phone calls, written letters, and even launched a Web site.

So far to no avail.

Fisher's problem is she does not fit into some standard seat belts, even though front seat riders are required to buckle up by law. Fisher and some of her friends usually rely on a seat belt extender, a small plastic device that snaps onto the belt and extends it several inches.

Most car makers provide extenders, some at no cost.

A survey of local dealers found most can order them for no cost, while a few charge up to \$30.

But Fisher learned during a recent hunt for a new minivan that Honda does not offer extenders — not even in its spacious Odyssey minivan.

"I have four extenders in my Chrysler and I've never had a problem," said Fisher, 38. "They have been around for as long as I've needed them."

Honda does not supply extenders because the devices make the vehicles less safe, said Art Garner, public relations director for Honda American Motor Co.

"It changes the positioning of the belt across the body from where the shoulder belt would cross the sternum and the strongest part of the body most capable of accepting blows, to soft areas of the body where it may do more damage than good," Garner said.

His advice to Fisher? Don't buy a Honda.

Fisher didn't settle for that answer.

After shopping around for minivans Fisher decided the best van for her and her husband was the Odyssey. It is one of the larger minivans on the market, according to Consumer Reports magazine. It also offers several features helpful to larger passengers — two automatic sliding doors, handles on the backs of the front seats to help rear-seat passengers get in and out, and generally lots of room.

Garner said the Odyssey seat belts can accommodate up to 95 percent of American males, based on a dummy crash test. All American vehicles must meet that standard, Garner said.

Fisher declined to give her measurements. But she said her size is unimportant, and that what is important is that every person who can fit into a vehicle should fit into the seat belt.

"My belief in this is that I am worth any space I need on this planet in order to be comfortable," said Fisher. "I don't feel like I'm the defective one."

Fisher is also concerned for her friends, some of whom also are large in body.

Melissa Taylor owns a Honda Civic, and she experienced the same frustration when she tried to outfit her car with extenders for a group of friends who made a road trip to Dallas a few years ago. The dealer suggested she

take her car to a shop that makes adjustments for the handicapped, where the seats could be moved.

"If a person can put their body in that seat from a standing position, I feel the seat belt should fit them," Taylor said. "I'm not saying they should give this to me — I'd be happy to pay for it just so my friends can be safe in my car. I'm just asking they offer it as an option."

So Fisher resolved to convince someone at Honda to change the policy.

She called customer relations offices, and wrote letters to executives, even to American Honda Motor Co. President Koichi Amemiya.

Answers were slow in coming.

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

Fisher said it took her "two months and a million phone calls." Most people with similar seat belt needs might just call once, get a no, and give up, she said.

So Fisher, a state computer programmer, made it her personal mission to change Honda's mind.

She set up a Web site (<http://members.aol.com/nobelts4us>) to generate support for her cause.

The site explains that she and her friends do not fit in most Honda seat belts, and that to be safe they should have access to extenders. The site is part of her ongoing effort to get Honda to provide extenders.

In one letter to Honda executives, Fisher explained that she loved the Odyssey's attention to detail, but asserted there was a glaring oversight.

"One important safety detail has been overlooked — seat belt extenders, or provisions for longer seat belts for larger passengers," Fisher wrote. "I am both puzzled and concerned by this oversight ..."

Honda seat belts should accommodate all passengers who can fit in the seats, Fisher said.

"Yes, I am a large woman, but I'm also very active," Fisher said. "I finished college two years ago, my husband and I are both employed full-time in professional positions. I attend a fitness class twice a week, I grocery shop, I go to the mall, I travel by plane a couple of times a year," Fisher said.

In general seat belt extenders are common, said Tim Hurd, a spokesman for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the federal agency that regulates auto safety. However, car makers are not required to offer them.

"The final word on design of the car is the manufacturer. If the manufacturer says they are incapable of designing an extender, then that's the final authority — they are the ones that know what they can or cannot do in their vehicle.

"The thing that is open to the Johnny Consumer is if the manufacturer doesn't make a vehicle that meets your needs, you buy another manufacturer's vehicle," Hurd said.

However, Hurd said, it is not unheard of for a car maker to change its products in the face consumer demands.

"It's not unprecedented that any consumer makes his wishes known and gets a product modified to meet the needs of a subset of the customers," Hurd said.

Fisher hopes that Honda's commitment to passenger safety will convince it to change its policy.

Honda co-hosts a Web site on the importance of buckling up (<http://nsc.org/traf/sbc.htm>).

"The difference between the belted person's stopping distance and the unbelted person's stopping distance is significant," the Web site states. "It's often the difference between life and death."