

THE POOR EXCUSES BEHIND NOT USING SEATBELTS

by: Marianne Sperry

Seatbelts save lives. I can ramble off a list of statistics and link to the videos from driver's education classes to further the point, but most New Jersey residents are already savvy to this information and accept it as fact. Seatbelts save lives. According to the New Jersey Division of Highway Traffic Safety, the state has one of the highest seatbelt usage rates in the country at 93.7% for front seat occupants – that's the good news. Here's the bad news – the number greatly decreases to 27% for adults who are in the back seat. Why is there such a huge disparity in the numbers? Why are passengers in New Jersey great at buckling up in the front seat, but so bad at using the exact same safety measure in the back seat?

I wanted to get to the bottom of this situation. There are injuries and fatalities occurring on the roads that can be prevented. It is a huge deal and there must be some reason New Jersey passengers are putting themselves at unnecessary risk. I read the statistics and researched articles, but still unsatisfied with what I discovered, I decided to turn to the experts – my fellow New Jersey brethren. So I talked with co-workers, friends, family, and random people in the supermarket (“Is that this week's People magazine? And how do you feel about buckling up in the backseat?”).

“THE BACKSEAT IS SAFER IN AN ACCIDENT THAN THE FRONT SEAT. I CAN BRACE MYSELF.”

Not true, unless you're a superhero. The reaction time in an accident is a split-second. In most cases, the accident will be over before a person thinks to try to brace himself. If he did somehow manage to brace himself with an arm or leg, it would shatter the bone upon impact. In a collision, the unbuckled passenger in the backseat is often referred to as a “bullet,” as the occupant continues to move at the speed of the vehicle until hitting something, sometimes getting ejected from the car. A seatbelt stops that force, and when worn correctly, spreads the impact over the larger parts of your body making it less likely to damage organs. Saving yourself not enough to convince you? Think of the other people in the car. The bullet effect doesn't apply only to the unbuckled passenger, but to all occupants of the vehicle. Who wants to live with the knowledge that not wearing a seatbelt caused serious injury to someone **else**?

“WE AREN'T TRAVELING FAR, SO IT'S A WASTE OF MY TIME.”

Did you know that most fatal accidents occur when traveling short distances in speed zones of less than 45mph? As far as buckling up being a waste of time, I think it's important to think bigger picture. It takes less than a minute to buckle up, whereas recovery from a serious injury could take months or even years. Seems like a no-brainer to me!

“I HEARD THAT A FRIEND OF A FRIEND OF A FRIEND GOT HURT FROM HIS SEATBELT.”

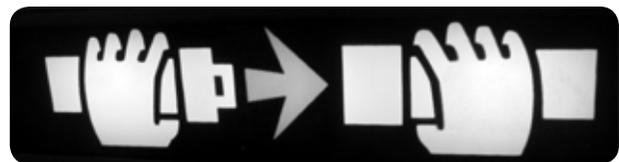
The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says the chances of being severely hurt or killed by a seatbelt is less than 1%. There's also a less than 1% chance a person could be killed by space debris hitting the ground, but we don't hide away in bunkers. There are always the possibilities of freak accidents, but people shouldn't live their lives based on the unlikely. The “what-if” chance of a seatbelt malfunctioning is no reason to ignore the irrefutable fact that buckling up is more likely to keep you safe than not. After all, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration also states that 13,000 lives are saved a year by using a seatbelt.

“I DON'T WANT TO END UP TRAPPED IN MY CAR BECAUSE OF MY SEATBELT.”

I understand the fear, I do. The idea of being trapped anywhere near water and fire gives me the heebie jeebies, but I want the best chance to survive as unscathed as possible. Seatbelts keep a person firmly in place in a collision. There is less of a chance of a being knocked unconscious and thrown around the car for passengers, who wear seatbelts, if a vehicle careens into water. By remaining buckled, it allows the passenger the opportunity to make the simple click to remove the seatbelt and make an exit. Here's the truth of the matter – the lack of a seatbelt is more likely to throw you out of the car, causing serious injury, than to impede your survival.

“I FORGOT TO PUT IT ON.”

Of all the excuses I've heard, this one is pretty lame. It's the law in New Jersey and any violators will be fined. Money is usually a good incentive to help remember important things. Some other options: put a post-it note on the back of the front seat; have friends and family remind you; or create a mantra whenever you head toward a vehicle like, “Don't forget my seatbelt. Don't forget my seatbelt.” Also, when you're driving, don't start the car until everyone is secured. Give it twenty one days, (the time it takes for a new habit to form), and you should be good to go. I don't want to hear the “I forgot” defense ever again. :)



There is never a good excuse for not using a seatbelt in the front or back seats because seatbelts save lives. Repeat it. Put it on a notecard and pass it around. Refuse to start the car until every person is buckled-up. C'mon New Jersey, let's conquer that 27% usage rate and set the standard.