

Road Safety Factsheet

Seat Belts: History

1930's

Several U.S. physicians equip their own cars with lap belts and begin urging manufacturers to provide them in all new cars.

1954

Sports Car Club of America requires competing drivers to wear lap belts.

1955

Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE) appoints Motor Vehicle Seat Belt Committee.

1956

Volvo markets 2-point cross-chest diagonal belt as an accessory. Ford and Chrysler offer lap belts in front as option on some models. Ford advertising campaign focuses on belts.

1957

Volvo provides anchors for 2-point diagonal belts in front.

1958

Nils Bohlin, a Volvo design engineer patents the "Basics of Proper Restraint Systems for Car Occupants," better known as a three-point safety belt. It comprises two straps: a lap strap and shoulder strap. Volvo provides anchors for 2-point diagonal belts in rear.

1959

Volvo introduces 3-point belt in front as standard, in Sweden.

1962

U.S. manufacturers provide seat belt anchors in front outboard as standard

The January 1962 issue of Which? strongly advocated belt wearing, revealing that a "first survey" of their effectiveness in Britain showed they would reduce the likelihood of death and serious injury by 60%.

1963

Volvo introduces 3-point belt in front as standard, in USA

1964

Most U.S. manufactures provide lap belts at front seat positions

1965

It becomes compulsory to fit seat belts in the front of cars built in Europe.

accidents don't have to happen

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1967

New cars in the UK must be fitted with front seat belts by law. Great Britain requires 3-points in front outboard positions.

1968

Great Britain requires retrofit of 3-point belts in front of newer cars.

1970s

“Clunk Click” TV commercials show the dangers of being thrown through the windscreen in a collision.

1973-74

A clause in the Road Traffic Bill concerning seat belts was introduced at Report stage in the Lords. The Bill was dropped on the dissolution of Parliament in 1974. A similar clause was again included in the Road Traffic Bill, but after a close vote in the Lords, it was removed. A separate Bill was introduced but the Second Reading was never completed.

1974-75

After passing through the Lords, the Bill was adjourned at the Second Reading in the Commons due to insufficient parliamentary time.

1975-76

John Gilbert, Minister of Transport, introduced a Road Traffic (Seat Belts) Bill in 1976. Later that year, the Bill was hastily withdrawn when a vote showed that “Only 99 MP’s would be present instead of the necessary 100”.

1976-77

Two more seat belt Bills were introduced. Both failed. The first - in spite of a majority of 110 at its Second Reading in the Commons - was abandoned because there were “too few people in the House”. The second Bill was defeated in the Lords by 55 votes to 53.

1978-79

In November 1978, William Rodgers MP introduced a seat belts Bill. It completed its First and Second Readings in the House of Commons with a majority of “almost 100”. Labour lost the General Election in 1979 and their Bills were shelved.

1979-80

Neil Carmichael introduced a Private Members Bill for seat belt compulsion during this parliamentary session. A smooth passage through the Committee stage early in 1980 led to the Bill being “talked out” at the Report stage during September 1980.

1980

Lord Nugent of Guildford, RoSPA’s President, introduced a Private Members Bill. It gained a majority of 36 at the Second Reading, but again failed for procedural reasons.

1981

Lord Nugent seized his chance with an amendment to the Transport Bill which introduced seat belt wearing for a trial period of three years. RoSPA's president triumphed and the Bill became law...at last.

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1983

From 31 January, it becomes compulsory for drivers and passengers (adult and children) to wear seat belts for a three-year trial period. Over 90 % of drivers complied at that time and still do.

1986

Both Houses of Parliament vote overwhelmingly to retain the requirement permanently.

1987

Rear seat belts required to be fitted to new cars.

1989

Wearing rear seat belts becomes compulsory for children under 14.

1991

It becomes compulsory for adults to belt up in the back.

1993

"Elephant" TV commercial demonstrates the danger presented by an unrestrained back seat passenger in a crash, who can be thrown forward with the impact of three and a half tons.

1996

Seat belts fitted to minibuses and coaches carrying groups of children on organised trips. (Forward facing seats required – sideways facing ones no longer permitted).

1998

"Julie" TV commercial comes as a reminder that unbelted rear seat passengers can not only injure themselves, but can also kill other people in the car.

2001

Seat belts required to be fitted to all minibuses and coaches.

2003

20th anniversary of seat belts - 50,000 lives saved.

"Backwards" TV commercial launched demonstrating, with the help of a flying pizza, the difference that a simple click can make between life and death.

2006

All children travelling in cars (with very few exceptions) required to use an appropriate correct child restraint until they are either 135 cm in height or 12 years old, after which they must use an adult seat belt.

2006

Passengers aged 14 years or over must use seat belts in buses and coaches and minibuses over 2,540 kg unladen weight.

2008

'Three Strikes' television advert and campaign launched to raise awareness of the consequences of not wearing a seat belt.

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2008

Major research report, “Strapping Yarns: Why People Do and Do Not Wear Seat Belts” published identifying what groups do not wear seat belts, and the reasons why not.

2009

Latest seat belt wearing surveys indicated that 95% of car drivers wear seat belts, 96% of front seat car passengers wear seat belts or use child car restraints, and 89% of rear seat car passengers wear seat belts or use child car restraints. Wearing rates in other vehicles, such as vans, were lower at 69%.

2010

A research report for the Department for Transport estimated that over 300 more lives could be saved every year if everyone always wore a seat belt.

2013

A review of research about seat belts for the Road Safety Observatory was published at <http://www.roadsafetyobservatory.com/KeyFacts/vehicles/seat-belts>, and concluded that seat belts are highly effective, and enforcement programmes consisting of highly visible and publicised periods of seatbelt law enforcement increase seatbelt wearing rates and reduce injuries.