
February 6, 2007

REALLY?

The Claim: The Back Seat of a Car Is the Safest Place to Sit

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THE FACTS Automobiles may not be the safest mode of transport, but many people wonder whether where they choose to sit can improve their odds.

According to several studies, it can, and the spot that is generally the least desirable, it turns out, is also the safest: the middle of the back seat. Uncomfortable, yes, but it's also the seat that typically has the largest "crush zone," an area around which the car collapses in a collision, ultimately protecting an occupant.

One large study of the subject, by researchers at the University of Buffalo in 2006, analyzed more than 60,000 fatal crashes and found that passengers in the middle back seat were 86 percent more likely to survive than those in the front seats, and 25 percent more likely to survive than those in the other rear seats.

But the study also found that about half of all adults in the middle back seat neglected to wear seat belts. They were about three times as likely to die in a crash as middle-back-seat passengers who did buckle up. And not wearing a seat belt in the back can have unfortunate consequences for those up front. One study found that even when passengers in the front wore seat belts, their odds of dying were five times as great if those in the back were not belted, a result of back-seat passengers' being thrown forward on impact.

THE BOTTOM LINE In an accident, the middle back seat is the safest place to be.

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