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Strapped In: Why Seatbelts are Non-Negotiable!

Ipsos experts emphasize the live-saving power of seatbelts and how it needs to transcend from mere legal compliance to become a fundamental defender of vehicular safety worldwide

It may not come as a surprise to us when we hear and read about road accidents in India. India has the highest number of total persons killed due to road accidents, followed by China and the United States as per the World Road Statistics, 2022 Published by the International Road Federation.

A total number of 1,68,491 lives were lost in road accidents in the calendar year 2022, in India. This corresponds to 11.88 deaths per 100,000 population.

In the ever-evolving field of automobile safety, advancements like automatic emergency braking, lane keep assist, lane departure warning, multi-angle rearview camera and many others have revolutionized accident prevention and notably enhanced road safety.

The life-saving power of seatbelts

Even with advanced safety measures, basic safety practices, such as wearing seatbelts while driving or riding in a car, remain crucial and can save lives. A World Health Organization (WHO) report states that wearing seatbelts can reduce the risk of fatality by 45-60 per cent in the event of an accident. In 2022 alone, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways in India reported 16,715 deaths due to people not wearing seatbelts.

A seatbelt also known as a safety belt is one of the vehicle's most effective safety measures, designed to reduce the risk of injury or death in the event of a collision. Despite the proven benefits of wearing seatbelts, the adoption of this simple safety measure varies across different demographics and cultures.

George Cayley, a prominent figure in aeronautics, is believed to have invented the seatbelt in the 19th century for use in his glider. This laid the groundwork for future safety belts. A major turning point occurred in 1959 when **Nils Bohlin**, a Swedish engineer, created the revolutionary three-point seatbelt for Volvo. This design became the global standard, significantly improving vehicular safety. The evolution of seatbelts, from Cayley's initial concept to Bohlin's widespread innovation, demonstrates not only mechanical progress but also a societal shift toward prioritizing passenger safety, making every journey a safer one.

In recent years, many automotive companies have increased their efforts to promote road safety, emphasizing the importance of seatbelts. This crucial safety regulation, aimed at enhancing passenger safety during road journeys, was introduced by the government in 2005. However, the lax implementation of seatbelt laws was highlighted in 2012 when renowned comedian and actor, Jaspal Bhatti, died in a car accident. Another tragic incident that shocked the nation was the death of Cyrus

Mistry, the former chairman of Tata Sons, who was not wearing a seatbelt during a fatal car accident.

Aiming to enhance safety, a 2021 government mandate required automobile manufacturers to equip passenger cars with at least four airbags. However, it's essential to understand **that airbags are only effective when used in conjunction with seatbelts**. Wearing a seatbelt remains the most critical factor in ensuring safety while driving.

Why is the seatbelt usage not followed?

A comprehensive study by Save LIFE Foundation across 11 cities disclosed alarming statistics.

- Among the 6,306 respondents surveyed, a mere 7% reported using rear seatbelts.
- Shockingly, only 27.7% were aware of the mandatory nature of rear seatbelt usage.
- Of particular concern were parents' responses, with 77% admitting that their children travelled in the rear seats without seatbelts.

**Image sourced from Google*





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India's diverse cultural norms and varied cultural landscape plays a significant role in seatbelt usage. Some regions may not prioritize seatbelt use, viewing it as unnecessary, while other reasons could be as follows:

- **Safety Perceptions:** Cultural beliefs about safety impact attitudes towards seatbelts. Some individuals underestimate risk on familiar roads or at lower speeds, leading to a perception that seatbelts are not essential in those situations.
- **Comfort and Freedom:** Perceptions of discomfort and restricted movement can deter seatbelt use. This is particularly relevant for passengers who prefer unconventional seating positions, reclining or find seatbelts uncomfortable in hot weather

Discomfort as a Deterrent

- **Physical Discomfort:** Many individuals, especially during long journeys or hot conditions, find seat belts uncomfortable due to constriction and heat retention. This discomfort can outweigh perceived safety benefits, discouraging seat belt use.

Social Norms and Peer Influence

Social Pressure: Social circles where wearing seat belts is considered uncool or unnecessary can influence individuals to skip buckling up to fit in. Conversely, positive peer pressure and promotion of seat belt use by influential figures can encourage compliance with safety regulations

Another significant determinant of seat belt usage behaviour is enforcement and compliance with traffic laws. While seat belt laws exist in India, enforcement can vary widely across different states and regions. In some areas, lax enforcement of traffic regulations may contribute to low compliance rates, as drivers feel they can get away with not wearing seat belts without facing consequences. This leads to people taking the law lightly and not following traffic rules. There is still a huge gap between government norms and people's understanding regarding them.

Efforts to promote seat belt usage in India must focus on education and advocacy. Public awareness campaigns highlighting the importance of seat belts and their life-saving potential can help shift attitudes and behaviors over time.

Moreover, targeted educational programs in schools, workplaces, and communities can help instil a culture of safety and responsibility among Indian car owners.

In conclusion, seat belts have become a crucial safety feature, transcending mere legal compliance to become a fundamental defender of vehicular safety worldwide. Understanding the complex factors influencing seat belt usage behaviour among Indian car owners is essential for developing effective strategies to promote road safety. By addressing cultural norms, improving enforcement and compliance with traffic laws, raising awareness of the risks associated with not wearing seat belts, and fostering a culture of safety through education and advocacy, India can work towards increasing seat belt usage rates and reducing the incidence of road traffic injuries and fatalities. Ultimately, prioritizing seat belt usage is not just a matter of compliance with regulations but a collective responsibility to protect lives and prevent needless tragedies on the road.

Ipsos believes, that apart from government initiatives and the government taking stricter action against those who don't obey traffic rules, OEMs should take this responsibility into their own hands and focus more on seatbelt usage via advertising and promote the same message through other mass media.

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