This is the Way Baby Rides
Using a Car Seat for Your New Baby

Car seat basics

• Baby always rides in a rear-facing car safety seat (car seat) for as long as possible. It is safest to stay this way to at least 24 months—or even longer, if the child fits the car seat size limits. It protects babies from head and spinal cord injury.
• Baby always rides in the back seat. It is much safer than the front seat. The center back seat is safest.
• Turn the air bag off if your baby must ride in the front seat. (See page 2.)
• Make sure the seat belt or LATCH attachments hold the car seat tightly.
• Buckle and tighten the harness snugly over your baby’s body.
• ALWAYS follow car seat instructions and the car manual to install and use the seat correctly.

Before your baby is born

• Go to a car seat safety class. Call your hospital or clinic to find one.
• Practice installing the car seat and adjusting the straps. Get it checked by a trained Child Passenger Safety Technician. (See Resources.)

Take supplies to the hospital

• Small baby clothes with legs.
• Car seat with instructions for car seat and car.
• Receiving blankets and a washcloth for padding around the harness. (See page 2 for drawing.)
• A towel to roll and use under the seat, if this is needed to set angle.

Choosing a car seat for a new baby

How can I choose the best car seat?

The “best car seat” is one that fits your baby and fits in your car. For a baby, you need a rear-facing car seat. Try it to make sure it is easy for you to use. You must be able to tightly install the car seat in your car. Try it in every vehicle you use. Exchange it if it doesn’t fit.

What kinds of car seats fit a new baby?

Infant car seat (1): Small, rear facing only; for babies up to 22 to 35 pounds. Helpful for carrying baby to and from the car. A tall baby may outgrow an infant car seat before reaching the weight limit, as early as age 6 to 9 months.

Convertible car seat (2): Faces the rear for babies and toddlers up to 30 to 45 pounds. Faces forward for older children. (Keep child rear facing to at least 24 months old or up to the rear-facing weight and height limits.) Avoid car seats that have straps attached to a shield or tray.

Car bed (3): Only for babies with medical conditions who a doctor says must lie flat.

Features to look for in a rear-facing seat:

• At least two shoulder strap heights, with the lowest setting less than 8 inches above the seat.
• Harness adjuster in front that is easy to reach and use.

Can I use a second-hand car seat?

A second-hand car seat may have hidden safety problems. Make sure all recalls (if any) have been repaired and that the seat has all its parts and instructions. If the car seat has been in a crash, it should not be used again.

Check for an expiration date on the car seat. If there is none, avoid using the car seat if it is more than 6 years old. Newer car seats are easier to use correctly and may have better safety features. Many newer seats also have higher weight limits, so they can be used longer. Check the labels.

Warning: Car seats are not cribs or play pens!
Avoid using the car seat for long periods of time. Limit use outside the car and always buckle the harness. Give babies plenty of “tummy time” to play.

Resources


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Steps to install a rear-facing car seat

1. Place the car seat in the back seat, facing the rear window. The back seat is safer than the front, especially in a car with air bags.

2. Use the seat belt or LATCH straps to attach the car seat tightly. It is very important that the car seat is tightly secured in the car. If the car seat slides around on the vehicle seat, your child could be seriously injured in a crash.

   Always read the instructions that come with the car seat. Also read the section on seat belts, LATCH, air bags, and car seats in your car manual. Do not use the lower anchors and seat belts at the same time unless both instructions say it is okay.

   To check for a tight fit, hold the car seat where the LATCH strap or seat belt holds the car seat. Pull forward and from side to side. The car seat should not move more than one inch. (Do not grab near the top of the car seat to check for tightness. The movement there is okay.)

3. Make sure your baby is reclined enough so his head doesn’t flop forward. Always follow any angle indicator on the car seat and instructions in the owner’s manual. They may say to use an adjuster on the car seat or to place a firmly rolled towel or foam roll under the car seat to set the angle (A).

Air bag danger: Put baby in back!

A baby riding in front with an air bag (B) is in great danger even in a minor crash. The air bag opens with great force in a crash. That could kill a child. The back seat is safer for all children.

If you have a small truck or sports car, do not drive with your baby in front unless the air bag has been shut off. Most very small vehicles have on/off switches or sensors to turn off the passenger air bag. Check the owner’s manual.

Bringing your new baby home

Dress baby in clothes with legs so the crotch strap can go between her legs.

Put the shoulder straps in the lowest position. Use the slots that are at baby’s shoulders or slightly below them. Put the chest clip at armpit level.

Tuck rolled blankets or towels along the sides (C). Padding may help a new baby sit comfortably. If baby slides downward, add a rolled washcloth between her crotch and the crotch strap.

Read the car seat manual about using a head support pad or infant insert that came with your car seat. It should not push baby’s head forward. Do not add other inserts, blankets, or towels under or behind baby. This can be very dangerous.

Adjust the harness straps to fit snugly, so you cannot pinch any slack (D). Do not use thick blankets or dress baby in heavy clothes. This can make it impossible to get the harness tight enough to hold the baby in a crash. Buckle the harness first and then put a blanket over baby.

Sometimes babies cry when in a car seat. If this happens, sit in back with your baby if possible, or talk or sing soothingly. NEVER take baby out of the car seat while the car is moving. If you need to take her out, pull over and park in a safe place first.

As your baby grows bigger

Keep harness straps in the lowest position until your baby’s shoulders reach the higher slots. Baby must be moved from an infant seat into a rear-facing convertible seat when:

• Baby’s head is 1 inch below the top of the shell, or
• Baby reaches the weight limit of the seat.

Plan to use a rear-facing convertible seat as long as possible—to at least 24 months old. This is the safest position to protect a child’s spine from injury. A baby should NEVER be faced forward until over 20 pounds AND 1 year of age. (For preemies: at least one year from the original due date.)