Car Safety for Tiny Babies
Preemies and Low Birth Weight Babies Need Special Care

Make sure your baby’s car seat fits his or her size and needs.

Choosing a car seat for a tiny baby

Some infant-only car seats fit preemies well and are easy to use and carry. A few convertible car seats also fit preemies.

Look for these features:
• A low weight limit to match your baby’s weight. Many car seats are limited to babies 5 pounds or more, but some start at lower weights.
• A five-point harness.
• A front harness adjuster that is easy to use on every ride.
• A low shoulder strap position that will fit best on a small baby. (See page 2 for more about harnesses.)
• Level (recline) guides that are easy to see and understand.

The basics

• Choose a car seat that is the right size and type for your baby’s length, weight, and health.
• A doctor may say your baby should ride in a car bed (see below, right).
• Avoid a used car seat or bed unless it has all its parts and instructions, has any recalls repaired, and has not been in a crash. Check its expiration date. If none, avoid using it if it is more than 6 years old.
• ALWAYS follow car seat instructions and the car owner’s manual.
• Put the harness over baby’s shoulders and between the legs. Make it snug.
• Install the car seat tightly in the back seat.
• Be sure the car seat faces the rear to protect the head, neck, and spine.
• For best protection, keep your baby rear facing up to 24 months or as long as he still fits the car seat height and weight limits. NEVER turn baby forward before one year from baby’s due date.
• Do not use the car seat as a seat in the home; only use it in the car.

Some babies must lie flat

Most babies can ride safely in a regular, rear-facing car seat with low harness slots. However, some premature babies may show signs of trouble when sitting this way.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that hospital staff monitor each baby born earlier than 37 weeks in a car seat before the baby goes home. This is to check for signs of trouble, such as slow heartbeat, too little oxygen in the blood, or periods of not breathing. Make sure to ask your baby’s doctor about this.

If your baby shows any of these signs, he or she may need to ride lying flat in a crash-tested car bed (pictures left and right). Use the car bed until the doctor tells you your baby can sit up safely. Also avoid using a baby seat or swing at home during this time. (Car bed models are listed on the next page.)

Tips for car bed use:
• Place with baby’s head toward the middle of the vehicle.
• Baby should lie on her back unless the doctor says to do otherwise.

Provided by:
Safe Kids Tarrant County led by Cook Children’s 682-885-2634
Checking harness fit

Look for a harness with low shoulder strap positions so it will fit close to your baby's body. Take a tape measure when you shop.

- **Shoulder harness positions**: start with the lowest position. The lower the straps, the better the fit for a baby. At most, the lowest position should be less than 8 inches from the bottom of the seat pad. For tiny babies, look for one as low as 5 or 6 inches.

- **Crotch strap distance**: less than 5.5 inches, if possible. Some seats have more than one position.

Correct car seat use

- Avoid travel with baby, if possible.
- Do not use the car seat in the home.
- Dress your baby in clothes with legs so the harness straps fit between the legs. Avoid a thick snowsuit or wrapping baby in a blanket. Put extra blankets **over** the straps.
- Avoid thick padding under or behind your baby. It would make the harness too loose, so your baby could be thrown out in a crash.
- Put shoulder straps in the lowest position, as close as possible to your baby's shoulders or just below. If the lowest position makes straps come out above the shoulders, use a different seat.
- Put your baby's bottom all the way back in the car seat.
- For support, use small rolled baby blankets or diapers beside baby's body and head and between the legs (pictured on top of page 1).
- A support pad that came with the car seat can be used. Only remove it if the instructions say it is okay. Do not use a pad that did not come with the seat.
- Put the harness over both shoulders and between baby's legs. Make it snug, so you cannot pinch any slack in the straps (picture, right).
- Put the chest clip at armpit level, not close to the neck or too low.
- Install baby's car seat in the center of the back seat if you can get a tight fit there.
- Install the car seat tightly. It should not move more than an inch forward or side to side. **ALWAYS** follow car seat instructions and the car manual.

Your baby should sit reclined, but not too flat or too upright (see picture, above). Make sure baby's chin does not flop forward, which could block his breathing. Baby's head should rest against the back of the car seat.

**ALWAYS** follow the recline angle guide on the car seat and check the instructions. If baby's head still flops forward, try a different car seat.

Some car seats have a base that adjusts to set the angle. If yours does not, you may need to place a firm roll of cloth or foam under it (picture, above).

**Note:** If baby has a breathing monitor or other equipment, secure it so it will move as little as possible in a crash. Use a seat belt or wedge it on the floor of the car.

Resources

- NHTSA Auto Safety Hotline: Recall and general car safety information, questions, 888-327-4236 or 800-424-9153 (tty), www.safercar.gov
- SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.: Car seat questions, detailed information, recall list, 800-745-7233, www.carseat.org

Current Car Bed Models:

- Angel Ride Infant Car Bed, Child Source, 800-815-6330
- Dream Ride Car Bed, Dorel Juvenile Group, 800-544-1108
- Hope Car Bed
  - Merritt Manufacturing, 317-409-0148
- List of car seats and car beds that may fit tiny infants: www.saferidenews.com

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