

National News

Side air bags may be dangerous for children, government says

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A federal safety agency today warned consumers that side air bags can kill or seriously injure children too close to the devices when they inflate.

The strongly worded consumer advisory from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration comes as an increasing number of automakers are installing side air bags as either standard or optional equipment to protect passengers in side-impact crashes. Each year, there are some 7,500 deaths from those crashes.

The safety agency also is asking all automakers with side air bags in rear seats to ship the vehicles to dealers with the bags deactivated. Dealers can then turn the side air bags on for consumers who want them after customers are advised of the potential risk to children, according to a letter being sent to manufacturers by the agency's administrator, Dr. Ricardo Martinez.

There have been no deaths or serious injuries reported from side air bags, unlike front air bags, which have been blamed for at least 145 deaths since 1990 and have caused a public outcry. The vast majority of deaths from front air bags were to children who were unrestrained.

The advisory and letter to automakers puts pressure on manufacturers to make sure their consumers understand the risks from side air bags to children, especially those who are unrestrained.

Federal regulators say testing done by the agency or provided by manufacturers shows that side air bags could deploy with enough power to seriously harm or kill children resting near the door or window or

leaning out the window. In all those tests, the crash dummies representing children were not wearing seatbelts or restrained in child seats.

The consumer advisory says that side air bags can enhance passenger safety in side-impact crashes. "However, children who are seated in close proximity to a side air bag may be at risk of serious or fatal injury, especially if the child's head, neck, or chest is in close proximity to the air bag at the time of deployment."

The advisory says manufacturers have an obligation to notify consumers "whether it is safe" for children to sit next to their side air bags.

In the letter to automakers, the agency especially targeted side air bags in the rear seats of cars because for years federal safety officials have been telling parents to put children age 12 or under in the back seats, away from front passenger air bags that could kill or injure them.

Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Audi and Rolls-Royce offer side air bags as standard equipment in the rear seats of some of their models. They deploy either from the door or the seat.

Side air bags also are standard or optional in the front or front and back seats of other models for those automakers, along with many other manufacturers including General Motors, Ford, Toyota, Honda and Volkswagen.

Earlier this year, BMW already began shipping its cars to dealers with the rear air bags turned off. An Audi spokesman, Doug Clark, said the company could not comment on the agency's proposal until company executives had received it.

Both companies have put warnings

about side air bags in owners manuals, and provided warnings on stickers or safety cards.

Mercedes is sending a letter to vehicle owners later this year stressing they should properly restrain children and there "is a potential for them to be injured if they are out of position or not wearing their seat belts," spokesman Fred Heiler said Wednesday.

However, Heiler said Mercedes was concerned that the warning being issued by NHTSA would scare parents away from using side air bags that "provide significant protection to adults and children."

Martinez told automakers he expected them to come up with a voluntary common approach to testing side air bags by the end of the year to make sure they are safe for children. He also said the agency would test the side air bags when children are properly restrained in child seats or seat belts because "it is not clear whether properly seated and restrained children incur any benefit" from them.

Safety officials have said all but one of the nine side air bags tested in a joint research program by NHTSA and Transport Canada could cause injury to children leaning or kneeling against a window or turned backward on a seat. The 1998 General Motors Pontiac Transport was the only vehicle that passed all the tests, officials said.

Clinton Expands Insurance Programs

President attempts to put children under federal funded programs

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

President Clinton pressed his effort to enroll more children in government-funded health programs Tuesday, and rival interest groups announced they were coming together to look for ways to get coverage for millions of uninsured Americans.

Disappointed that a new children's health program has not reached more children, Clinton directed federal agencies to look for ways to find these kids in school. "If we're going to bring more health care to children, we're going to have to start where the children are," Clinton said in a speech before the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Meanwhile, only days after the House finished a contentious debate over giving patients new rights in dealing with their insurance companies, two of the leading interest groups - on opposite sides - announced a conference in January to address the larger issue of the uninsured.

"It is no longer appropriate for any of us who care about the uninsured ... to go our separate ways," said Ron Pollack, president of Families USA, a liberal consumer group that campaigned for new patient protections.

He joined Chip Kahn, president of the Health Insurance Association of America, in announcing the conference in which groups representing hospitals, doctors, nurses, workers and employers will present their ideas for addressing the issue of the uninsured.

Kahn's group created the television advertisements featuring Harry and Louise that helped kill Clinton's plan to provide universal health insurance, something Families USA strongly supported.

"We hope this will spur politicians, pundits and, above all, the public," he said. The timing, at the start of 2000, is meant to inject the issue into the presidential election, they said.

Two pollsters - one Democratic, one Republican - were on hand to present new polling data indicating that

Americans say the issue of the uninsured is important and believe it's getting worse. They actually overestimate the number of people without insurance and say they would be willing to pay more taxes to help them.

The Center for Studying Health System Change released a study Tuesday that found 20 percent of uninsured Americans are offered insurance by an employer but decline it, mostly because the premiums are too expensive. Overall, about 14 percent of people decline employer-sponsored insurance, with about two-thirds of them finding coverage elsewhere. That leaves the rest - about 7 million people - without any insurance.

Nationally, the number of people without health insurance rose to 44.3 million Americans last year. The number of children without insurance remained about 11 million, despite creation of a \$24 billion program to get children coverage, targeting those whose families earn too much to qualify for traditional Medicaid.

So far, the Children's Health Insurance Program has only signed up about 1 million of the 11 million uninsured children, although it has enough money for about 2.5 million. On several occasions, Clinton has urged states to look harder for these children, and he announced a renewed push Tuesday.

"It is simply inexcusable that we're sitting here, and have been, with the money for two years to provide health insurance to 5 million kids and 80 percent of them are still uninsured," Clinton said.

Clinton hopes to help a total of 5 million uninsured children by enrolling some 2.5 million through the new program, plus other children who have always been eligible for Medicaid but for some reason have not enrolled.

The president planned to sign an executive order instructing the secretaries of health and human services, education and agriculture to report to him in six months on how to institutionalize the school outreach programs. And this week, the secretaries of health and human services and education will send information to state agencies explaining how schools and state governments can use CHIP funds to pay for school outreach programs.

Teen tobacco law said not enforced

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Department of Health and Human Services and many state governments have failed to enforce a 1992 law aimed at ending the sale of cigarettes and other tobacco products to minors, an independent analysis of their performance says.

While all states and U.S. territories have laws prohibiting the sale of tobacco to minors, most have neglected to properly investigate whether the laws are followed or prosecute when the laws are broken, according to the study released today by the Substance Abuse Policy Research Program and published in The Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, a peer-review journal of the American Medical Association.

"Very few states have implemented effective enforcement programs, and national surveys confirm that there has been no measurable reduction in the availability of tobacco to youths," said the study's author, Dr. Joseph DiFranza, a professor of family and community medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. With the 1992 Synar Amendment, named for its sponsor, the late Rep. Mike Synar, D-Okla., Congress required states to pass laws banning tobacco sales to anyone under age 18 with aggressive enforcement measures that may include random, unannounced inspections using decoy buyers at grocery stores and other retailers.

States must outline how they have carried out the Synar Amendment in their annual applications for block grants from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. And the Department of Health and Human Services must in turn withhold some funding from states who have not complied.

But the study, which examined the applications filed in 1997, found that 18 states or territories and the District of Columbia had failed to meet the Synar requirements yet were not punished by the department. They were: Alaska, Arkansas, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Hawaii,

Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Tennessee, Virginia, Wyoming, Guam, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Northern Marianas, Palau and Puerto Rico.

Fifteen states and territories did not provide evidence that inspections of cigarette vendors were tied to prosecutions, and 18 states showed no evidence that merchants had been successfully prosecuted for selling tobacco to minors, the study said. Most of the 41 states that prosecuted such cases did not enforce the laws in a way that "would even remotely be expected to reduce the availability of tobacco to minors," it said.

The availability of tobacco to minors and the underage use of tobacco is reduced when the proportion of lawbreaking merchants is cut to 10 percent, the study said, but federal officials are using a threshold of 20 percent for its judgments.

"It only takes one store to sell to minors since youths learn quickly which stores will sell to them," DiFranza said in a statement.

The report also criticized state law loopholes that make it harder to prosecute the laws, and said the Synar Amendment itself was flawed because it threatens the funding of mental health agencies, which are not in charge of carrying out tobacco access laws.

This year, the government notified Delaware, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Oregon, Rhode Island, Wyoming, and the District of Columbia that because they haven't met the Synar criteria, the law requires 40 percent cuts in 1999 block grants for substance abuse and treatment programs. Though they may appeal, the states could lose \$37 million in drug treatment funds.

But the Clinton administration, and some members of Congress, say these penalties should be reconsidered.

The Substance Abuse Policy Research Program is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and administered by the Wake Forest University School of Medicine.



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