

Saving your neck

What's the first thing you should do when you get in your car?

(a) Fasten your seat belt, (b) disengage the emergency brake, or (c) make sure the head restraint is correctly positioned?

The answer is (c). Adjust the head restraint, if need be, and then fasten your seat belt. (Fixed restraints, which are less common, are actually more effective than adjustable ones.) The problem, however, is that the head restraints in your car may not be well designed. According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), the great majority of cars have poorly designed head restraints: they are neither high enough to protect your head, nor close enough to "catch" your head if it rotates backward in a crash. Many of the adjustable ones don't even lock in the "up" position. The 1998 models tended to have better head restraints than older cars, but of 161 cars evaluated by IIHS, only 5 were rated as having good head restraints, and only 22 as acceptable. These were invariably the more expensive cars, such as the Acura Integra, BMW 5 and 7 series, Cadillac Catera, Honda Civic del Sol, Jaguar VDP and XJR, Lexus ES 300, Mercedes E and SL series, Toyota Supra, and Volvo 960. IIHS has not surveyed 1999 models.

Why have a head restraint?

Head restraints, mandated by the U.S. in front seats since 1969, are intended to protect you from whiplash. Usually occurring in rear-end collisions, whiplash is a neck strain or sprain caused by the sudden backward rotation of the head in a crash. Your torso is thrust upward, your head backward, and then both your head and torso rebound forward. The experts are still not sure just how this injures the neck, but neck sprains and strains are reported in up to 66% of auto insurance claims for bodily injuries. Some of these claims are thought to be fraudulent, but genuine whiplash can cause headaches and facial pain and, in rare cases, chronic neurological problems. The cost is enormous—billions of dollars in medical care, plus higher rates for car insurance. And we all pay, even drivers who've never been in a crash.

Doing the best you can with what you have

Head restraints, even not-so-good ones, do reduce the risk of neck injuries when correctly used. Check the restraints when you are buying a new or used car. The U.S. standard requires that, when fully extended, the top of the restraint measure at least 27.5 inches from the horizontal portion of the seat. The European standard is 29.5 inches, about to be upgraded to 31.5 inches, enough to protect very tall people. The U.S. standard may also be upgraded.

Adjust the restraint before fastening your seat belt if someone else has been sitting in the seat before you. This simple act may save you lots of pain and money. Make sure the restraint sits as near the top of your head as possible, no less than 3.5 inches below the top of your head, and no more than 3 inches from the back of your head. The restraint ideally should lock into position once you've determined what the proper height is.

When the car-buying public begins to ask for better design in head restraints, we'll probably get it.

Futuristic note: The latest safety feature in the new Saab 900 is a self-aligning headrest, called the "Pro-tech" system. You can choose any position for the headrest when driving. If the car is rear-ended, sensors in the seat back detect your movement, and the headrest moves into position to keep your head from snapping back.