

Traveling Safely with Your Baby

Car seat and safety tips

This handout includes a checklist, instructions, and resources for how to safely travel and use a car seat with your baby. This handout also covers how to safely transport your baby by bicycle, stroller, and while shopping.

Choosing the Right Car Seat

The “best car seat” is one that fits your child and your vehicle, and is used correctly every time. When you look for a car seat, remember that some models are better than others for preterm babies. The best seats will have a low starting weight limit, shoulder straps that can be set very low, and might include a small baby insert or pad. Once you choose a car seat, be sure to read all the instructions and properly install it in your vehicle.

Car Seat Checklist

Here is a checklist to help you know if your car seat is safe. **All of these items must be true for your car seat to be safe to use:**

- My car seat is the right size for my infant (check your car seat’s height and weight limits).
- My car seat fits in my vehicle (read the installation instructions for both your vehicle and for the car seat).
- My car seat has never been in an auto accident or crash.
- My car seat does not have any missing parts.
- The harness strap slots are at or below the level of my baby’s shoulders.
- My car seat does not have any cracks in the frame.
- My car seat is not expired (check the bottom of your seat or your manual for expiration dates).
- My car seat has the instruction manual, or I know where to find it online.

How to Use Your Car Seat Safely

- Washington state law requires all children to be in a car seat that faces the back of the car (“rear-facing”) until they are **at least 2 years old**. It is best practice to continue to have your child rear-facing until they outgrow **either** the weight or height limits for the car seat.
- Most infant-only car seats are used until around the baby’s first birthday. The next car seat your child will use will most likely be a convertible seat, which can be used both rear-facing and forward-facing. Washington state law requires children to ride in a harnessed car seat (whether rear-facing or forward-facing) until they are at least 4 years old.
- Car seats must be placed on a vehicle seat that faces forward. Do **not** place your infant car seat in a seat that faces sideways or backwards.
- The safest place in the back seat is a spot where:
 - You can get a tight installation of your car seat
 - You can accommodate other passengers or car seats
 - You can utilize extra safety features that might have come with your car seat
- **Never** place any car seat in front of an active air bag.
- Install the infant car seat at the recline angle determined by the car seat manufacturer. For your newborn, choose the option that is most reclined, if there are multiple options.
- Sometimes a rolled towel can be used to help achieve the correct recline angle. **However, only do this if it is allowed by the car seat manufacturer.** Check the car seat manual for instructions.
- The handle should be locked and in the car-use position determined by the manufacturer. Check the manual for instructions.
- When you are securing the car seat in your car, firmly tug on the car seat where the vehicle’s seat belt threads through the car seat belt path. The car seat should move no more than 1 inch in either direction.

How to Place Your Baby in the Car Seat

The harness straps should come from the slots at or below the baby's shoulders in the car seat. Straps should lie smooth and snug over the baby's shoulders.

To test this, try pinching the straps over the baby's shoulders. You should not be able to pinch the strap between your fingers.



The chest clip should be at armpit level. This helps keep the harness straps in place over the baby's shoulders.

The harness straps should lie flat and smooth over the baby's thighs.

The buckle strap should be in the slot closest to the infant without being underneath them.

Remember:

- After-market car seat products are not safe. Do **not** use any item that did not come in the box with your car seat. It is not safe.
- Some car seat brands allow using a rolled receiving blanket or cloth diaper to help position your baby. **Make sure this is allowed** by checking your instruction manual. Contact the car seat maker if you need assistance.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics advises that all babies ride rear-facing until they are at least 2 years old. The safest practice is for babies to stay rear-facing until they reach the weight or height limit of their car seat.
- It is important to register your new car seat with the manufacturer in case of recalls. Visit www.seatcheck.org to check if there is a recall for your car seat.

Learning More About Car Seat Safety

- If your car seat is not safe to use, UWMC sells car seats at an affordable price. Please ask your healthcare team if you have any questions.
- If you have questions about car seat safety, you can visit www.seatcheck.org to:
 - Get the most up-to-date information about car seats
 - Find out if your car seat has been recalled
 - Find the nearest place to have your car seat checked for safety
- Visit the Safe Kids Worldwide website at www.safekids.org/car-seat :
 - In the “Safety Tips” section, select “Risks”
 - Then, click on “Car Seat,” “Booster Seat,” and “Seat Belt”

Baby Safety Classes

You can also take a baby safety class. UWMC offers a class called “Babysafe.” To learn more about this class, call 206.789.2306 or visit www.uwmedicine.org/patient-resources/support-groups-classes.

- Scroll down to the UW Medical Center section
- Click the link for “Childbirth, parenting, and new baby classes”

Basic Car Safety

- On hot days, make sure that the car seat straps and buckles are not too hot before you place your child in the seat.
- Children should not wear bulky clothing or coats in their car seat. In cold weather, buckle in your child tightly and then put a blanket over the harness straps for warmth.
- **Never** leave your child alone in the car, not even for a minute.
- Don’t forget that your child is in the car, especially on days when your routine is different than usual. Create a reminder by putting something in the back of the car next to your child, such as a briefcase, purse, cell phone, or other item that you will need when you get out of the car.

- When driving long distances, take a break every 2 hours. Prolonged periods of time in the car seat can strain developing bones and muscles and can even lead to lower-than-normal oxygen levels. Stop and take your child completely out of the car (not just out of their seat) for 15-20 minutes and give them a chance to eat, drink, stretch, and have their diaper changed.
- Always securely harness your baby if they are in their car seat, even if the seat is not in your vehicle. Tight harness straps help keep a baby's body in the best position to support their breathing. Plus, trips and falls can happen when you are carrying the car seat or when it's being used in a stroller system. Secure harness straps will help prevent injury to your baby.
- Toys can become a projectile and injure your child in a car crash. To be safe:
 - Choose soft toys for your child to play with in the car
 - Secure all loose objects, toys, and pets to protect everyone in the car

Bike Safety

- Infants younger than 12 months are too young to sit in a rear bike seat and should **not** be carried on a bicycle.
- Do **not** carry infants in backpacks or carriers while using a bike.

Stroller Safety

- Choose a stroller with a wide base so it won't tip over.
- To avoid tipping your stroller, do not hang anything from the handles.
- Always use the stroller seat belt and harness. Use rolled-up baby blankets on both sides of your child's head to add support, if needed.
- Before placing your child into the stroller:
 - Open the stroller all the way
 - Make sure the hinges are fully engaged
 - Make sure the wheels are locked
- If you string toys across the top of the stroller, make sure they cannot fall on top of your baby.
- **Always lock the stroller wheels when you stop.**

Safety When You Are Shopping

- It is best to use a front carrier or a stroller while you shop.
- It is best not to place your child in a shopping cart. Only infant car seats can be placed in a shopping cart. If you must place your infant car seat in the shopping cart, do it as safely as possible:
 - Place the car seat in the large part of the shopping cart.
 - Have the seat facing you and uncovered so you can maintain a line of sight at all times.
 - Keep your child fully buckled in their seat.
 - Keep your shopping trips short to minimize the time your infant is in their car seat.
 - Wipe cart handles and surfaces with sanitizing cloths. These cloths are often provided by the store. Carry some with you, just in case.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your baby's doctor or nurse if you have questions or concerns.

Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., call the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at 206.598.4606.