



e-quilibrium

- *“electronic briefs on behavior and health”*

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Belted

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), only 14% of drivers and passengers used seat belts in their automobiles in the early 1980s. By 2008, the rate of seat belt usage had risen to 83%! More importantly, as the use of seat belts has steadily climbed, there has been a corresponding decline in passenger vehicle occupant fatalities per mile traveled. It is estimated that in 2006 over 15,000 lives were saved through the use of seat belts. Using seat belts is an excellent example of a simple behavior that can impact health, and these data from the NHTSA represent the success of a longstanding public health initiative.

The NHTSA recently (May 18-31) completed a major “Click It or Ticket” campaign, designed to reach the 1 in 5 automobile drivers/passengers who still don’t wear seat belts. If seat belt use rates rose to 90% in each state, it is estimated that over 1600 traffic fatalities would be avoided annually in the United States, along with over 22,000 serious injuries.

There is political and philosophical debate on the question of whether or not behavior can or should be legislated. At least in the area of seat belt use, it appears that laws do make a difference. The 26 states that have a primary law regarding seat belt use (i.e., vehicles can be pulled over by law enforcement officers solely for having occupants not using seat belts) had a 2008 use rate of 88%, compared to 75% in the 24 states with either secondary laws (i.e., occupants can be ticketed for not using seat belts only if stopped for another violation) or no law (only in New Hampshire is it legal for adults to not use seat belts).

In addition to further increasing seat belt use generally, there are two specific areas getting NHTSA focus: nighttime driving and teen drivers. Although nighttime seat belt usage studies are harder to do (studies typically rely on direct observation of the shoulder belts), investigators typically find that 6 to 7% fewer drivers/passengers use seat belts at night. While this number may seem relatively small, the fact that there is a higher rate of motor vehicle accidents at night makes it more concerning.

Teens are particularly inclined to not wear seat belts, especially at night. In 2007, the NHTSA reported that 55% of 16-20 year olds killed in traffic accidents were not wearing seat belts. This figure goes up to 66% for nighttime traffic accident fatalities in this age group.

Given that 4 out of 5 automobile drivers/passengers use seat belts, it is likely that most readers of **e-equilibrium** are regular seat belt users. For the minority of drivers/passengers who aren't belted, the primary reason to "click it" isn't to avoid a ticket. Rather, using a seat belt is a matter of health, and perhaps life.

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