



PREVENTION OPPORTUNITIES UNDER THE BIG SKY

Primary Enforcement of the Seat Belt Law Can Save Lives

In 2007 the motor vehicle occupant fatality rate in Montana was 3 times higher than the rate in the U.S. (18.6 per 100,000 in Montana, 5.4 in U.S.).¹ Motor vehicle fatalities are strongly related to impaired driving (especially drinking and driving), driving at high speeds, and not using seat belts.² Strikingly, during the past ten years in Montana 3 of 4 motor vehicle occupants who died in motor vehicle crashes were not using seat belts.³ Montana law requires seat belt use by motor vehicle occupants but enforcement of the law is hampered because law enforcement officials can cite violations or offer education only if a vehicle is stopped for another reason.⁴ This is called a secondary enforcement law. In contrast, primary enforcement laws authorize law enforcement officials to stop a vehicle in order to educate or issue a warning or citation when an officer observes an unrestrained vehicle occupant. States that have enacted primary enforcement seat belt laws have documented substantial increases in seat belt use and decreases in motor vehicle fatalities.⁵ In Montana about one-third of adults report that they do not use seat belts regularly. This issue of *Montana Public Health* describes seat use and non use as well as broad support for enactment of a primary seat belt law.

How behavior and attitudes are assessed The Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) is a state-based random digit dial telephone survey of a sample of non-institutionalized adult Montanans. From January through June 2010, 3,103 Montanans responded to this survey. Two questions were: 1. "How often do you use seat belts when you drive or ride in a car?" (Always, nearly always, sometimes, seldom, or never); and 2. "Currently Montana has a secondary seat belt law, which means law enforcement officers cannot stop vehicles because a driver or any passenger is unbelted— there must be another reason for the stop. A primary seat belt law allows officers to stop vehicles when they observe any unbelted driver or passenger in the vehicle. Do you support a primary seat belt law in Montana?"(Yes or no). Information about age, gender, race, and health insurance was also collected.

Seat belt use in 2010

- 69% of the respondents reported always wearing a seat belt when riding or driving in a vehicle. (Table)
- 76% of women and 62% of men reported always wearing a seat belt.
- Reported seat belt use was higher for persons aged 65+ (74%) and 45-64 (73%) than for those aged 18-44 (64%).
- Persons with health insurance were more likely to report seat belt use (71%) than were persons without health insurance (59%).
- Individuals who reported drinking and driving or binge drinking in the last month were less likely to always wear a seat belt (31%, 57% respectively).

Montanans support for a primary law Overall, most Montanans do support a primary seat belt law (63%). Women were more likely than men to support a primary law (72% vs. 54%), and persons aged 65+ (75%) were more likely than those aged 18 – 64 (60%). American Indians (74%) were more supportive for a primary law than were whites (62%). Individuals who reported drinking and driving or binge drinking in the last thirty days were less in favor for a primary law (42%, 49% respectively).

Table. Self reported seat belt use and support for primary law, Montana, 2010

	Always wear seat belt % (95% CI)	Support primary seat belt law % (95% CI)
Total	69.1 (66.6-71.5)	63.2 (60.6-65.7)
Sex		
Men	62.4 (58.6-66.0)	54.4 (50.5-58.3)
Women	75.7 (72.2-78.9)	72.0 (68.5-75.2)
Age (years)		
18-44	63.6 (58.7-68.3)	59.9 (54.8-64.7)
45-64	73.3 (70.5-76.0)	61.1 (57.9-64.3)
65+	73.7 (70.4-76.7)	75.4 (72.2-78.4)
Race		
American Indian	53.6 (42.0-64.8)	73.8 (61.4-83.3)
White	69.9 (67.3-72.4)	61.9 (59.2-64.6)
Other	72.6 (59.5-82.8)	80.4 (69.7-88.0)
Have health insurance		
Yes	71.4 (68.6-73.9)	65.2 (62.5-67.9)
No	59.1 (52.3-65.6)	54.7 (47.6-61.7)

Prevention steps Always wearing a seat belt while riding or driving in a vehicle, even for short distances, is an effective strategy for saving lives, reducing injuries, and reducing healthcare costs.(Figure) Many young adults, especially young men, and about half of American Indian adults are at increased risk for sustaining life- threatening injuries or death during motor vehicle crashes because they are not using seat belts.

Implementing a primary seat belt law as well as counseling patients about alcohol use and other risky behaviors would reduce mortality and morbidity from motor vehicle crashes.



Figure. Buckling up: a step that saves lives.

Recommendation:

(Health professionals)

- Encourage patients to wear seat belts in motor vehicles.
- Advise patients NOT to drink and drive.
- Consider implementing Screening, Brief Intervention and Refer to Treatment (SBIRT)⁶ into your practice to identify and help change risky health behaviors.

(General)

- Always wear a seat belt when riding or driving in a vehicle.
- Never drive while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- Eliminate distracted driving, do not text or talk on a cell phone while driving.

For more information about injury prevention in Montana, contact Bobbi Perkins, Injury Prevention Coordinator at (406) 444-4126 or email at bperkins@mt.gov.

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1400 Broadway
Helena, MT 59620-2951

Anna Whiting Sorrell, Director, DPHHS
Steven Helgerson, MD, MPH, State Med. Officer
Jane Smilie, MPH, Administrator, PHSD