

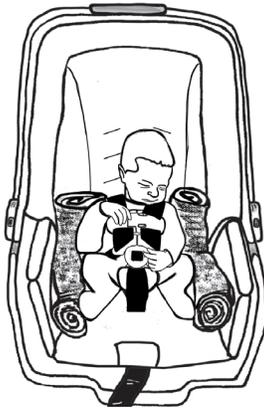
# Car Safety for Tiny Babies

## Preemies and Low Birth Weight Babies Need Special Care

Child  
Safety  
Facts  
2026

**Use a car seat that fits your tiny baby's size and needs.**

Car seats made for small babies often have special pads to help with fit. If baby needs more support, place fabric rolls along the sides of the body (not head).



Look for a car seat that may be used by babies who weigh 4 pounds or less. Follow the instructions to set it up for a small baby.

### The basics

- Choose a car seat that is the right size and type for your baby's length, weight, and health. If your doctor says your baby should ride in a car bed, see below, right.
- ALWAYS follow car seat instructions and the car owner's manual.
- Put the harness on baby as shown in the instructions. Make it snug against all parts of baby's body.
- Install the car seat tightly in the back seat of the car.
- Baby's car seat must face the rear. That protects baby's head, neck, and spine.
- For safety, keep baby rear facing as long as possible (likely 24 months or more). Check state laws and car seat instructions for the minimum age to turn forward—never before age 1. For preemies, count the age from baby's full-term *due date*.
- If using a second-hand car seat, be sure it has all parts and instructions and has not been in a crash. Check for recalls. Don't use a car seat that is too old—many may not be used after six years; check the label.
- Do not use a car seat as a seat in the home. Use it for travel only.

### Choosing a car seat for a tiny baby

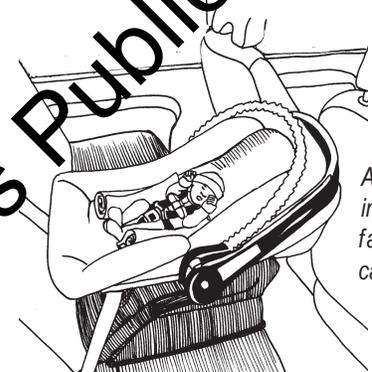
Some car seats are better for tiny babies than others. Use a rear-facing-only or convertible car seat that fits baby well.

#### Look for these features:

- **A low starting weight limit.** If baby weighs less than 5 pounds, look for a car seat with a label that says it can be used at 3 or 4 pounds or "from birth."
- **A small-baby insert or pad.** Many car seats have special padding for small babies. (Do not add a pad under baby unless it was made by the car seat maker for use with your car seat.)
- **Shoulder straps that can be set to a very low position.** (See page 2 for more about how a harness should fit.)
- **A buckle strap that can be made snug for a tiny baby.** (See page 2.)

#### Be sure the car seat fits in your car.

Try installing a car seat before you buy it, if possible. Follow the instructions for the car seat and the car. The car seat should not move more than an inch when pushed near the belt that attaches it to the car. Follow instructions so that it reclines properly for baby.



A preemie in a rear-facing-only car seat

### Some babies must lie flat

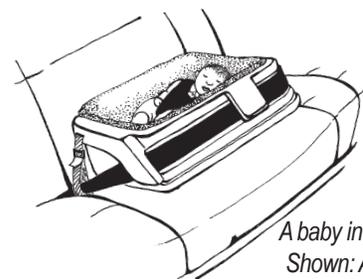
Most babies can ride safely in a regular rear-facing car seat if the harness fits properly (as described on page 2). However, some babies may show signs of trouble when not lying flat.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that **each baby born earlier than 37 weeks** be monitored in a car seat by hospital staff before going home. Staff will check for danger signs, like a slow heartbeat or a breathing problem. Ask your baby's doctor about this.

If your baby has trouble riding in a regular car seat, the doctor might say baby may ride only when lying flat in a crash-tested car bed (picture, right). A box on the next page lists approved models. Use the car bed until a doctor says your baby can sit up safely. Also, avoid using a baby seat or swing at home during this time.

#### Follow instructions and these tips when using a car bed:

- Install so that baby's head is toward the middle of the car.
- Place baby in the car bed the way your doctor says is best (usually on the back).



A baby in a car bed. Shown: Angel Ride Infant Car Bed, for babies up to 9 pounds.

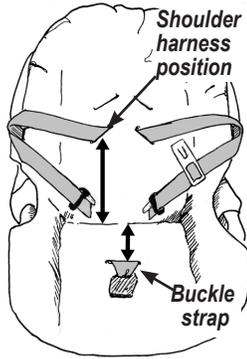
Make  
Every Ride  
A Safe Ride



### Checking harness fit

Look for a harness that can be set up to fit a small body. Take a tape measure when you shop, and check the:

- **Shoulder harness:** Put the straps in the lowest position. They must go through the car seat at or below baby's shoulders. If they do not, try a different car seat. For most newborns, the lowest position should be less than 8 inches above the bottom cushion. For tiny babies, look for one only 5 or 6 inches above it.
- **Buckle strap:** Look for one that is less than 5 inches forward of the back cushion. Many straps can be adjusted.



### Correct car seat use

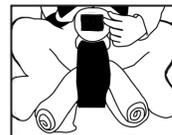
- Limit time baby spends traveling.
- Do not use a car seat in the home.
- Dress your baby in clothes with legs so the buckle strap fits between the legs. It is not safe for thick clothing or blankets to be under the straps. If using a blanket, put it **over** the straps.
- Don't add padding *under* or *behind* your baby. It makes the harness too loose, so your baby could be thrown out in a crash. Do use the pads that come with your car seat. Remove them only when the instructions say you should.
- Put the shoulder straps in a position at baby's shoulders or just below. If the lowest position goes through the car seat *above* the baby's shoulders, use a different car seat.
- Follow instructions to set up the harness for a small baby. Make it snug against all parts of baby's body. Test that you cannot pinch any slack in the straps (picture, right).



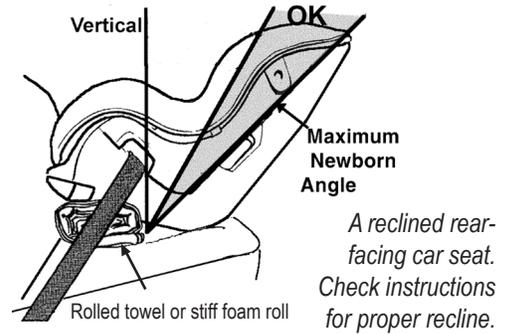
Pinch test for snug straps

Put the chest clip at armpit level. If it touches the neck of a tiny baby when placed there, move it down slightly.

If baby needs more support, add small fabric rolls *beside* baby. Make sure the fabric does not cover the face or limit breathing. (See picture, page 1.) If baby slouches, ask the car seat maker if you should add a rolled cloth behind the buckle strap (as shown).



- Install baby's car seat in the back seat of the car. Use the center seat if you can get a good fit there.
- Install the car seat tightly. It should not move more than an inch when pushed near the belt. **ALWAYS** follow car seat instructions and the car manual.



**Your baby should sit reclined**—not too flat or too upright (see picture, above). Be sure the chin does not fall forward, which could block baby's airway. The back of baby's head should rest against the car seat.

**ALWAYS** follow the instructions and the recline guide on the car seat to make it recline. If you have followed instructions and your car seat is still too upright, you may need to place a rolled towel or foam roll underneath it (see above). If it is not possible to make the car seat recline properly in your car, try a different car seat.

**Note:** Breathing monitors and other heavy items must be secured so they cannot hurt baby in a crash. Use a nearby seat belt or place items on the floor of the car.

### Resources

**National Center for Safe Transportation of Children w/ Special Health Care Needs:** 800-755-0912, [www.preventinjury.org](http://www.preventinjury.org) (Click Adaptive Transportation)

**AAP Clinical Report:** "Safe Transportation of Preterm and Low Birth Weight Infants at Hospital Discharge." <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/123/5/1424>

**National Vehicle Safety Hotline:** Recall and general safety questions, 888-327-4236 or 888-275-9171 (tty), [www.NHTSA.gov](http://www.NHTSA.gov)

**SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A.:** Questions, safety materials, 800-745-7233, [www.carseat.org](http://www.carseat.org)

### Find someone to help:

[www.NHTSA.gov/carseat](http://www.NHTSA.gov/carseat) (select Inspection under Installation Help) or [www.safekids.org/find-a-technician](http://www.safekids.org/find-a-technician)

### Car Bed Information:

Dream Ride Car Bed (Dorel Juvenile) [www.safety1st.com](http://www.safety1st.com); 800-544-1108

Hope Car Bed and Angel Ride Car Bed (Merritt Manufacturing) [www.merrittcarseat.com](http://www.merrittcarseat.com), 317-409-0148

### Distributors:

Child Source, <https://childsource.com>

Prevention Alternatives, 517-927-7731, or email [shinn@comcast.net](mailto:shinn@comcast.net)

### Dangers of Front Air Bags

**Place baby in the back seat!** An opening air bag can kill a baby in a car seat or on someone's lap.



**Baby's car seat must face the rear and should be in the back seat.** But, if baby does ride in front, the air bag **MUST** be off. Look for an on-off switch and an air bag light on the dashboard. Learn about the air bags in your car. They protect most riders—but can be a danger to babies. Check the car's owner's manual and warning labels on the car's visors.