



PREGNANT WOMEN IGNORE THE RISK OF BEING IN CARS

About 600 children under the age of 5 die in cars every year, and there are endless information campaigns and media stories devoted to reducing that number.

But researchers estimate that thousands of unborn children die in car crashes every year and the problem hardly registers with parents, and few people are even considering the safety measures available -- like the mother not driving at all, or maybe even just staying out of cars altogether.

“Since the risk to the unborn child in a car is almost completely avoidable,” says Susan Winlaw, co-author of *Car Advice For Women (and Smart Men)*, “it might mean the mother cutting back on her personal mobility as a safety measure.”

Winlaw points out that an unborn baby is usually in more danger in a car than a young child is.

“The young child’s in the rear, often facing backwards, and well away from most of the danger of something intruding into the car,” Winlaw points out. “But the unborn baby’s sitting inches from the steering wheel and airbag, or maybe a couple of feet from the passenger side dash, and always right next to a door where a car or something else can punch through.”

On top of that, says Winlaw, you don’t even need a crash to hurt an unborn baby, since the gravitational forces of events like an abrupt stop or severe slide can damage the placenta. “It’s the same principle that causes doctors to tell pregnant women not to ride roller-coasters,” Winlaw points out.

Dealing with those risks is a decision for the mother to make, Winlaw says, once she’s aware of the danger. “Making her aware of the danger is what we’re trying to do.”

Winlaw says that when she and co-author Alex Law researched *Car Advice For Women*, “We discovered quite a few safety and security items of concern to women that weren’t getting much public exposure or were being misrepresented, but the danger to unborn children is perhaps the most compelling safety issue of all.”

Researchers at the University of Michigan Health System say that about 250,000 pregnant women every year experience some kind of trauma during their pregnancy, and that about two-thirds of them are involved in motor vehicle crashes “that result in thousands of fetal deaths each year.”

The most common cause of fetal death in a car crash is “abruptio placenta,” which occurs when the placenta prematurely separates from the uterine wall. This can keep the unborn baby from getting the nutrients it needs and can result in death or health problems in the future.

This is why the Michigan researchers advise that all crashes involving pregnant women should result in medical attention as soon as possible. Winlaw adds that it would also be smart for a pregnant woman to consult a doctor after any severe auto incident, like a skid, a spin, a crash-avoidance move, or a hard-braking incident.

When it comes to looking after the unborn child, says Winlaw, “If being confined to a bed for four months is at one end of the scale, then being behind the wheel of a car going 70 mph on a busy highway is at the other end. The former situation is pretty much impossible for women to achieve these days, but the latter is completely avoidable, at least in theory.”

The first decision for a pregnant woman should involve the necessity of her being in the car at all. “If the answer’s yes,” Winlaw says, “then more things need to be considered.”

The pregnancy danger is covered in depth in the book and there are links to serious medical backgrounders at CarAdviceForWomen.com, Winlaw says, but there are also some point-form things to bear in mind.

Finding someone else to drive is key, Winlaw says, since that allows the pregnant woman to sit away from the steering wheel. “The middle of a vehicle is the safest place to be, since it provides the person with more of a buffer zone from anything that hits the car, as well as from the hard points of the car itself.”

If possible, pick a large vehicle over a small one. “Every reputable crash-testing agency and all the insurance records tell us that vehicle size and weight have a lot to do with passenger safety,” Winlaw says, “and smaller cars are simply more dangerous.”

Wherever you’re going in the car, Winlaw advises that you pick the route with the slowest speeds, since velocity is often the thing that turns the results of a crash from injuries to deaths. “You might also want to consider a route without curves or dangerous spots, and keep an eye open for any weather that might provoke slides or spinouts.”

If a pregnant woman does decide to drive, she must wear a seatbelt.

“If a seatbelt’s worn correctly,” Winlaw says, “it can help protect the mother and the child.” That means putting the waist belt under the belly and the shoulder belt to one side of the belly, but between the breasts and over the middle of the collarbone.

“In other words,” Winlaw says, “keep the belts off the belly,”

For more information on this and other safety issues, Winlaw’s book is available only at CarAdviceForWomen.com.

Winlaw admits that this subject may not be pleasant for some people, and it’s maybe something people don’t think about when they’re planning a car trip. “But maybe they should,” she says. “Women need to know the risks and do what they think best for themselves and the unborn child.”