



Feature Column

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**Keeping Your Hometown Healthy
Unintentional Injuries**

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Unintentional Injuries – Accidents Don't Just Happen

Did you know that the number one killer of Americans between the ages of one and 44 is unintentional injury? Not heart disease, not cancer, not stroke, but unintentional injury, or “accidents” as they are often called. Accidents result in nearly 70,000 deaths and millions of nonfatal injuries each year. Most of these deaths and injuries were not “accidents.” The word “accident” means a random event, beyond anyone’s control and due entirely to chance. Most injuries could have been prevented through actions on the part of the person involved, the community or government.

Seat belts save an estimated 9,500 lives each year in the U.S., but every hour someone dies in America simply because a seat belt was not used. In 2001, motor vehicle crashes were responsible for the deaths of 523 Arkansans, 71 percent who were unrestrained. Yet only 63.7 percent of Arkansans buckle up, compared to 75 percent of the rest of the country.

Seat belts provide the greatest protection against ejection from a vehicle during crash. Ejection is 15.38 times greater for unbelted persons as for those who have fastened their safety belts. Seventy-five percent of occupants who were totally ejected from passenger vehicles in 2001 were killed.

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Adults who don't buckle up are sending children a deadly message: it is all right not to wear a safety belt. As we all know, children model adult behavior. Research shows that if a driver is buckled, 87 percent of the time, their children will also be restrained. When a driver fails to wear his seat belt, restraint use for children is only 24 percent.

Motorcycle-related deaths and injuries can also be lowered by the use of motorcycle helmets. Nationally, per vehicle mile traveled, motorcyclists are about 16 times more likely to die in a crash than an automobile passenger. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), motorcycle helmets are 67 percent effective in preventing brain injuries. A motorcyclist without a helmet is 40 percent more likely to incur a fatal head injury and 15 percent more likely to incur a nonfatal injury than a motorcyclist wearing a helmet when in a crash. In 1996, before the repeal of the motorcycle helmet law, Arkansas' motorcycle helmet usage was 97 percent. It is now estimated at 52 percent. According to NHTSA, in the first full year following the repeal, Arkansas fatalities increased by 21 percent, compared to the last full year under the helmet use law requiring all riders to wear a helmet.

Arkansas law still requires motorcycle helmets for riders under the age of 21. According to law enforcement officials, helmet laws that govern only minors are extremely difficult to enforce. In addition, those uninsured motorcyclists who fail to use motorcycle helmets and are involved in traffic crashes place a heavy financial burden on Arkansans. According to NHTSA, studies show that riders without helmets involved in crashes are less likely to have insurance and more likely to have higher hospital costs than riders who use helmets in similar crashes.

Here in Arkansas, deaths related to residential fires are also a serious problem, with Arkansas among the five worst states over the past 10 years. On average, fire departments in the United States respond to a residential fire every 74 seconds. Cigarettes are the number one cause of all fatal

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residential fires. Smoke alarms are extremely effective in preventing fire-related death and injury. The chances of dying in a residential fire are cut in half when a working smoke alarm is present. Only 83 percent of homes in Arkansas have at least one smoke alarm, and that does not guarantee that they are working. The National Fire Protection Association estimates that 94 percent of homes in the U.S. have at least one smoke alarm. Unfortunately, 50 percent of home fire deaths occur in the six percent of homes with no smoke alarm.

Preventing deaths and injuries from motor vehicle crashes, motorcycle crashes and residential fires can be as simple as buckling your seat belt, wearing a helmet and installing a working smoke alarm on every level of your home. These and other basic measures can save thousands of lives and many millions of dollars in health care costs.

For more information regarding unintentional injury prevention, contact Virginia Lancaster of the Arkansas Department of Health at (501) 661-2278.

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