

Why must babies under one year of age ride facing the back of the car?

Babies should ride facing the back of the car until they are **at least** one year old, preferably longer. (In Sweden, children ride rear facing until age three, but they have big rear-facing seats made to fit larger children.) In a crash, an infant's soft spinal column can stretch and the spinal cord can be damaged if he is riding facing forward. The baby could die or be paralyzed permanently. This is true even for babies who have strong neck muscles and good head control.

Babies have heavy heads and fragile necks. The neck bones are flexible, and the ligaments are loose to allow for growth. If the baby is facing forward in a frontal crash – which is the most common and most severe type – the body is held back by the straps, but the head is not. The head is thrust forward, stretching the neck and the easily injured spinal cord. Older children in forward-facing safety seats or safety belts may end up with temporary neck injuries or fractures that will heal. But a baby's neck bones actually separate during a crash, which can allow the spinal cord to be ripped apart. It's like yanking an electrical plug out of a socket by the cord and breaking the wires.

In contrast, when a baby rides facing rearward, the whole body – head, neck, and torso – is cradled by the back of the safety seat in a frontal crash. Riding in a rear-facing safety seat also protects the baby better in other types of crashes, particularly side impacts.

Most convertible safety seats can be used a rear-facing position up to 30-35 pounds, so there is no reason to increase the risk of spinal injury by turning a baby around to face forward before age one. Most babies outgrow the typical infant-only seat – the type that usually has a handle – before they are nine months old and will need to use a rear-facing convertible seat

If the baby is riding in an infant-only seat – the type that usually has a carrying handle – it should be replaced with a convertible seat before the baby's weight reaches the maximum (20—22 pounds for most models) and before the top of the head is within an inch of the top edge of the infant-only seat.

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