

*ASK THE VEHICLE SAFETY LAWYER – Small Drivers*

***I am a 5' 2" female and I have to sit extremely close to my vehicle's steering wheel. If I am involved in an accident can the airbag seriously injure me?***

Not only can the airbag seriously injure you, it can kill you. Second and third generation airbags, even though they have been de-powered from the mid 1990's, still deploy outward at 300 mph. A deploying airbag has the explosive equivalent of 20 shotgun shells. Airbags are completely inflated in less time than you can blink an eye.

Besides the forces involved when an airbag deploys, an airbag doesn't deploy outward like a pillow. In fact, airbags deploy outward like a tube of sausage, and then the airbag takes on the shape of a pillow.

When an occupant's chest is right against the steering wheel due to the driver's height, there are a number of potential problems that confront the driver. First, the membrane that holds the airbag in place separates or has a flap that opens. This can cause facial lacerations. The unfolding bag can cause bag slap that can literally rip a person's head from her shoulders. The deploying bag can sling shot an occupant rearward faster than the occupant was going forward. This can cause neck fractures and brain injuries.

So what is a safe distance to be away from the airbag? Sit in your vehicle and put your chin on your chest and measure 16 inches from the point of your head that sticks out farthest. To do this you have moved your seat rearward. Now see if you can touch the pedals. If you can, then you have enough special distance between your body and the airbag. If you can't touch the pedals, call the dealership and ask if they have pedal extenders. These devices have been around for years. In fact, numerous vehicles are starting to be sold that allow the driver to move the pedals toward them so that they stay away from the airbag. If you can't touch the pedals try wearing a shoe with a bigger sole so the shoe's thickness will help stretch your body length.

Airbags are a wonderful safety device. But for an airbag to do its job, you need to take a few precautions. First, always wear your seatbelt. An airbag is the secondary safety system. The seat belt is the primary safety system. Second, sit as far away as possible from the airbag. Third, always try and sit straight up rather than leaning to one side or positioning you out-of-position. Fourth, never have anything between you and the airbag like a pet, purse or whatever. Lastly, don't carry sharp objects in your shirt pockets because a deploying airbag can turn a pen into a lethal weapon.

