Safety & Wellbeing
Information Sheet

Occupational Road Risk – Use of Head Restraints

Whiplash is an unfortunate outcome of many road traffic accidents and it can lead to significant periods of pain and discomfort. In many circumstances it can also result in lost time at work and reduce our ability to interact with family and friends. It is clearly in our interest to minimise the effects such an injury may have on our life.

Risk assessment work to minimise the chance and outcomes of any accidents is a good starting point. The proper use of head restraints can minimise the effects of whiplash and this information sheet aims to help develop an understanding of how to set restraints effectively.

Background

At impact, the vehicle is accelerated forward causing the seat to push against your back.

1. Your body is cushioned by the seat while your head and neck continue to move back.
2. If your head is unsupported due to an improperly positioned head restraint, it continues to move backwards over the head restraint
3. Properly adjusted head restraints protect your neck by keeping your head and body aligned throughout the collision.

Is Your Head Restraint Adjusted Correctly?

The best way to make these adjustments is to have another person adjust the head restraint for you the first time while you sit properly in the seat. You can then view the position (you could even mark it with a marker pen on the brackets) and repeat the positioning later should others use the vehicle. However, you can do it yourself using the following process.

Position your seat appropriately

Your seat should be inclined to less than a 20 degree angle. Sitting in this minimally inclined position will help keep you in the seat during a rear end collision.

Check the height of your head restraint

The proper position is to have the top of the head restraint level with or above the top of your head. You can measure this by placing your hand on top of your head and adjust the head restraint to be touching your hand.

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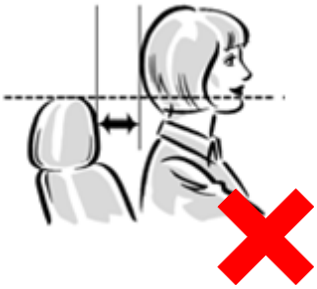
Is your head restraint close enough?

The proper position is to adjust the head restraint such that it no more than 5cm from the back of your head. Closer head restraints are twice as effective at preventing injuries as those set too far back. Closer means that your head will have less distance to build up speed and load the neck during an impact.

Summary

Remember to set the head restraints for each and every vehicle you drive.

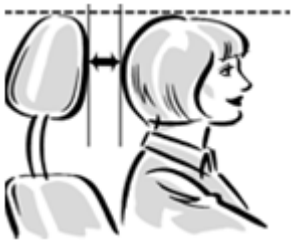
Bad Practice



This poorly adjusted head restraint is set both too low and too far from the back of the head.

This leaves the head and neck unsupported in the event of a rear-end collision.

Good Practice



This correctly positioned head restraint is set at the proper height for this individual and is about 5cm (or less) away from the back of the head. This will provide significantly better protection for the head and neck in a rear-end collision than a poorly adjusted head restraint.

Always ensure your head restraint is adjusted properly, as either a driver or a passenger.

Other Resources

IS11 - Occupational Road Risk
IS23 - Ergonomic Driving
IS69 - Safe use of Mobile Phones (or similar)
IS80 – Minimising Vehicle Reversing
AS32 - Driving at Work
HSF46 - Occupational Road Risk Assessment
Online Training (via CONNECT)
Practical Training (Transport Services)