Work-related Road Safety Guidance from Interactive Driving Systems: Tips for Driving While Pregnant

At Interactive Driving Systems, we have been doing an increasing amount of work with global pharmaceutical sales fleets in recent years, which often have a higher proportion of women drivers than in many other sectors. Rather than clichés and bad jokes, this led us to think about and explore some of the gender issues in work-related road safety – such as the risks of driving while pregnant.

Discussions with Professor Hank Weiss from Dunedin School of Medicine suggested that: ‘Pregnant women should always wear the lap and shoulder belt, with the lap belt firmly placed under the belly and across the hips’. Professor Weiss particularly acknowledged research by Beck et al (2005) focusing on seatbelt use among reproductive-aged women and prenatal counseling on seatbelt use.

We also discussed the risks of driving while pregnant with Roche Australia fleet manager Jann White, as the company has had the following fleet policy guidance: ‘Pregnant woman are required by law to wear a seatbelt. Correctly worn, this will help protect both mother and unborn child. The lap part of the belt should be positioned over the upper thighs and as comfortable as possible across the hips. The sash part of the belt should be placed in between the breasts and the lap part securely fitted over the upper thighs. Do not place the seatbelt across the waist. This is a SIGNIFICANT risk that should be taken seriously to protect mother and baby.’

Further research revealed 10 good practice tips for safe travel when pregnant:

1. Where possible, minimize the need to drive. Especially as your pregnancy progresses and your ‘baby’ gets closer and closer to the steering wheel. If you must travel, plan the route to allow for safe breaks (bathroom and leg stretching) and let others know your travel plans. You should also think about your safety and comfort when entering and loading things into your vehicle.

2. Drive carefully. Collisions can be reduced significantly by pregnant women following general driving tips, such as refraining from tailgating by
following the three-second rule, avoiding cell phone use, reducing speed and considering public transport which is safer.

3. Wear your seatbelt at all times. The belt will have no adverse effects on your pregnancy, though it may protect you and your child. When pregnant, allow the waist strap to rest below the bump, while the shoulder strap should slide effortlessly across the chest. The lap belt should be secured below your ‘bump,’ low and snug on your hipbones. Never wear the belt across or above your belly. Always use the shoulder belt, which should fit snugly between your breasts.

4. Position yourself correctly. Move your seat as far back as is comfortable and tilt it slightly away from the steering wheel. Try to position yourself at least 25 centimeters from the steering wheel. Also, make sure the steering wheel is tilted toward your breastbone rather than toward your abdomen. Avoid leaning forward. Sit back against the seat with as little slack in your seatbelt as possible. This will keep your bump from hitting the bottom of the wheel, minimize your forward movement in a crash and let the air bag operate correctly. Air bags are sometimes blamed for causing bodily harm to the driver. While there’s always a chance, you’re far less likely to be injured if you’ve taken the proper air bag precautions.

5. If you’re in a collision - even if it’s a minor one and you feel OK - have the baby’s heartbeat checked to make sure no damage has been done. Even if you don’t feel you’ve been hurt, research suggests that pregnant women in crashes without documented injuries are at greater risk of premature labor caused by a placental abruption.

6. Take regular breaks. It’s important to keep healthy circulation, particularly in your legs so take regular breaks, even if just for a couple of minutes, so you can stretch your legs.

7. Minimize driving at night. Night driving is exponentially more dangerous, and not just for pregnant women. Night driving reduces visibility, increases the chance of encountering a drunk driver and increases fatigue risks.

8. Fill up before hitting the road. It is not just the car that needs to be kept topped up during a pregnancy. This is also essential for the mother-to-be behind the wheel. If you’re pregnant, it’s imperative to keep your blood sugar at a healthy level, and that you avoid eating unhealthy food. By eating before you leave the house, and packing some healthy snacks for the road, you can keep your blood sugar in check and eat healthily. Drinking plenty of water to stay hydrated is important and extra snacks such as bottled water and fruit should be carried when travelling.

9. Prepare for health emergencies. Your health is at greater risk during pregnancy, which multiplies when you get behind the wheel. Packing a travel
pillow, toiletries, fully charged mobile phone and additional clothes are recommended. If you are far along in your pregnancy you could find these items particularly handy if a little one decides they are not going to be patient and a delivery needs to be suddenly carried out.

10. Stop driving at the best time. As you get closer to your due date, it is a good idea to reduce driving. Freedom, independence and your sales bonus are tough to give up, but you should only drive when absolutely necessary. As you enter your third trimester, take a back seat to the safety of you and your child. Although there is no hard and fast rule, most women tend to stop driving around 30 weeks. You should also consider when to start driving again after giving birth.

By following these tips, upcoming mothers can reduce the risks to both them and their baby. Note, however, that driving always carries a risk – to be avoided and minimized as far as possible.