

Insights and Updates



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N.J. seat belt law

Effective Jan. 18, 2010, legislation was signed into law requiring all occupants to buckle up, regardless of their seating position in a vehicle. The law applies to all passenger vehicles including vans, pickup trucks and sport utility vehicles that are required to be equipped with seat belts.

The reasons behind this law are simple. During the past 10 years, an average of 200 unbuckled drivers and front-seat passengers died on New Jersey's roadways. Also during that same span 70 unbuckled drivers and front-seat passengers were thrown out of their vehicles during crashes and killed.

Prior to Jan. 18, the New Jersey seat belt law targeted only adults in the front seat, not the back seat. Minors (children under 18 not subject to the Child Passenger Law discussed below) in either the front or back seats, and adults in the front seat, were required to wear a fastened seat belt that is adjusted properly. Now adults in the back seat also must wear a seat belt.

Under the new law, the driver still is responsible for buckling minors and all adults are responsible for their own compliance, which is a primary offense. However, the new back seat belt requirement is a secondary offense, which means a police officer may only ticket the unbelted adult back-seat passenger if the driver of the vehicle has committed some other

motor vehicle offense. The penalty for a first offense of any seat-belt violation is \$25, plus court fees.

New Jersey's child passenger law

In addition to the above law, children up to age eight or 80 pounds must ride in a safety or booster seat in the rear seat of the vehicle. If there is no rear seat, the child must sit in the front seat secured by a child safety seat or booster seat. The law also states that children under age eight who weigh more than 80 pounds must

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wear a seat belt, but not necessarily ride in a booster seat, anywhere in the vehicle. The penalty for a first offense of a booster seat violation is \$25, plus court fees.





Factors for high insurance rates

For most of us, thoughts of insurance aren't something we like to belabor. Each year, we take a deep breath and pay our premium; we're dismayed at the cost, but we're glad it's over for the year. However, this is not the sort of economy in which we can let any segment of our finances go unexamined.

Insurance rates can seem mysterious and opaque. And, in truth, they are complicated. Insurance isn't priced like other products, because the money each of us pays helps cover the cost of unforeseen future fires, burglaries or accidents. Underwriters, the employees who set rates for insurance companies, essentially try to predict the future. So, where does that leave us, when we want to reduce our insurance premiums—trying to predict someone's predictions of the future?

Fortunately, there are some general guidelines to help get your rates under control.

Auto insurance

- **Location.** The premium an individual is charged is affected directly by the number and costs incurred by accidents of drivers who live in his or her rating territory—and by the number of thefts in that territory.
- **Driver classification.** Drivers are grouped by age, gender and marital

status. Some groups have more frequent and more costly accidents than others. The highest rates usually are assigned to youthful drivers.

- **Driving record.** Drivers with accidents and serious violations on their records generally are charged more because statistically they will have more claims than the average driver.
- **Use of car.** Vehicles driven to and from the job usually are more vulnerable to accidents than cars used only for pleasure purposes.
- **Type of car.** Some cars cost more to repair or to replace, based on factors, including ease of repair and the original cost of the car. New cars, for example, are more costly to repair and to replace than are older vehicles.
- **Your credit.** As strange as it may sound, there appears to be a link between credit scores and greater- or less-than-average loss experience. (See "Credit scores and insurance" on page 4.)
- **Discounts.** Most companies offer some standard discounts, including: taking a defensive-driving course, qualifying as a good student and insuring multiple vehicles. Some insurance carriers have developed their own discounts for such things as buying your homeowners policy from the same company.

Homeowners insurance

- **Location.** Just as with auto insurance, with homeowners coverage, the factors are points like how close your house is to a fire station.
- **Build.** The least expensive houses to insure are the least flammable. Homes built of materials, like brick, stone and concrete, have lower rates than homes built of materials like wood.
- **Cost.** The lower the cost of your home, the cheaper the insurance. But, make sure you consider the replacement cost of the dwelling at today's prices.
- **Type.** Single-family, owner-occupied homes cost less to insure than duplexes. Factors such as a home business can drive up the premium.
- **Claims history.** Whether or not you owned it at the time, insurance companies consider previous claims when they calculate your premium rate.

Of course, your professional, independent insurance agent is your best bet to reduce your insurance rate. If you need to make a change or are just curious, give us a call today. We'll compare coverage from a variety of carriers to find you the best deal.



Credit scores and insurance

With incessant commercials stressing the importance of credit scores, you probably understand its basic purpose. But, did you know that some insurance companies monitor their clients' scores too? Companies' primary evaluation of potential clients comes from what is known as an insurance score. This number is a calculation based on a person's insurance loss history, correlated with credit report information. Your degree of risk is based on the history of others with similar statistics. While your credit score is not the sole factor used in setting premiums, a low score can have a negative impact.

The original purpose of credit scores was to gauge the likelihood of repaying a loan. However, the figures are being consulted in more and more industries, which can create a problem for those in the lower range. Three main credit scoring firms—Equifax, Experian and TransUnion—and countless websites are available for anyone to view their reports. Monitoring one's score is recommended for all consumers, even those without credit problems.

If you find yourself battling a poor rating, obtaining a report is the first step toward improvement. Having access to the reports lets you find and fix any incorrect information. It also identifies delinquent accounts, debts and late payments. There are several ways to raise one's score. One of the first steps is to set a spending limit on the credit cards. Paying credit card bills on time and reducing outstanding debt also will boost scores. Canceling cards or opening new ones is not advised, as it can negatively affect credit scores. If the debt has become overwhelming, consumers can contact their creditors to devise a repayment strategy.

Maintaining a healthy score is crucial for consumers. Using credit irresponsibly costs much more than the total on the bill for your card. Your ability to buy a car, obtain a mortgage or rent an apartment can all be adversely impacted—along with insurance premiums.

If you have any questions or concerns on this topic, don't hesitate to contact your professional insurance agent.

News from our agency

It's a good idea to update insurance policies annually

Unless you work for an insurance company or are an insurance agent, you probably never think about updating your insurance. However, you should review or update all your insurance policies at least once a year under normal circumstances and more if you've had changes in your life. These policies can include your homeowners or renters policy, your auto insurance and your life insurance policies. Not only will annual insurance reviews ensure you have adequate coverage that reflects changing financial or personal circumstances, together we can compare rates to several different companies to guarantee you are getting the best rate possible. If you haven't already done so, give our agency a call. Now is the time to review and update your policies.