

Safety alert – Unsafe seatbelt extenders

Questions and answers

NOVEMBER 2019

What are seatbelt extenders?

Seatbelt extenders (or extensions) are temporarily added to the original seatbelts in vehicles when those original seatbelts aren't long enough for the seat occupant.

They generally consist of a seatbelt buckle attached to a short length of belt webbing with a tongue (the metal square that clicks into the buckle) at the other end.

Why has a safety alert been issued about seatbelt extenders?

The NZ Transport Agency became aware of concerns about the safety of these products and decided to test a range of them.

The results of the testing raised significant safety concerns about the performance of some seatbelt extenders. They failed (meaning they ripped apart or similar) after being subjected to loads that were below the minimum safe load set by approved safety standards. Safe loads represent the forces the seatbelt would be expected to withstand in the event of a serious impact.

After reviewing the results, we decided to alert users of these products, and businesses selling them, about these serious concerns and what to do as a result.

Which seatbelt extenders are affected by this safety alert?

The safety alert contains advice about all seatbelt extenders – everyone using them should refer to the information and check their extenders for labels showing they've been tested to an approved standard.

Our marketplace has changed rapidly and unsafe products are readily-available online, from local sources and from international ones.

If there's no label at all, the extender should not be used. However, the presence of a label doesn't mean the extender is safe, as labels are easily printed with any symbol or standard, and counterfeit products are readily-available online.

We haven't issued a definitive list of makes/models of seatbelt extenders because most available online have no indication of their make/model.

The key thing to look for is a label showing the manufacturer's name and that it was tested to an approved standard.

What do vehicle owners need to do?

Check any seatbelt extenders used in your vehicle for labels with an approved standard – if there isn't one, don't use the seatbelt extender.

Our advice is to replace any potentially unsafe seatbelt extenders with seatbelt extenders from a reputable 'brick & mortar' store. It's in their interest to only supply safe, quality seatbelt extenders. Stores based in New Zealand are subject to our laws and if the products they supply aren't safe, stand to face harsh penalties.

What should I look for?

If your seatbelt extender has a label, we recommend you enquire with your local auto parts store or WoF/CoF provider to ensure it is legitimate and safe.

Are extenders universal?

No. Seatbelt buckles and tongues vary from vehicle-to-vehicle. For example, an extender that fits a Honda may not fit a Holden. We recommend you seek fitment advice from your local 'brick & mortar' auto parts store or a retailer who has enough information about your vehicle to make a proper determination.

How was the testing done?

Testing was performed using a calibrated pull test machine. The testing pulled the extenders until they broke, and the breaking strength was recorded.

Seatbelts are required to be tested by both a pull test machine as well as a 'sled' test device, simulating the actual deceleration and forces in a crash. If seatbelts (or extenders) can't even pass the basic pull test, there's no point in testing them on a sled test.

Are these extenders covered by WoF checks?

No, unlike the original seatbelts fitted in vehicles, seatbelt extenders will not be checked by WoF inspectors. Instead, we've issued a safety alert to raise awareness to users and operators and to provide guidance.

Vehicle owners or users should check any seatbelt extenders themselves.

Why is the Transport Agency recommending that seatbelt extenders not be used unless absolutely necessary?

The safest approach is to use only the original seatbelt as it was designed and fitted to the vehicle. Seatbelts are part of a wider system of safety measures built into vehicles and the safest approach is to not make changes to any part of that system.

However, we understand that sometimes seatbelt extenders need to be used. In these cases, only extenders tested to an approved standard should be used.

Our advice is also to remove the extender when it's not in use.

What should retailers and traders do?

Any seatbelt extenders that can't be verified as meeting an approved standard should be removed from sale immediately.

Why have unsafe seatbelt extenders been allowed to be sold?

These products are not fitted by vehicle manufacturers and easily fall outside the scope of vehicle inspections. As the marketplace has rapidly changed, it's now all too easy for anyone to import unsafe products and provide them to unwitting consumers.

Can I get my money back if I've bought a seatbelt extender that doesn't meet an approved standard?

This isn't something the Transport Agency can advise on and will depend on how you bought the extender. The Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment's Consumer Protection website has some information that might help: <https://www.consumerprotection.govt.nz/general-help/common-consumer-issues/refund-replacement-repair/>