



Schwartz Communications

The Washington Post

NTSB urges airbags for small aircraft

By Ashley Halsey III
Jan. 12, 2011

Were it not for the broken bones, the brief flight of the little Cessna two-seater would have been comical.

The student pilot lost control just as it lifted off from a small California airport in 2008. First the plane's tail smacked back down on the runway. Then it skittered off to the left, hit a runway sign and became airborne. But another sign loomed and was mowed down, too. The plane made it another 1,000 feet before landing nose-first flipping upside down.

The pilot was saved by a mushrooming airbag that deployed much like that of a car.

The [National Transportation Safety Board](#) on Tuesday urged companies building non-commercial planes to make airbags standard. It also recommended that the [Federal Aviation Administration](#) order that shoulder harnesses be retrofitted to bring older planes into compliance with requirements for new planes.

“Although airbags have been mandated in automobiles for over a decade, the aviation industry has no such requirement for small aircraft,” said Deborah A.P. Hersman, the NTSB chairman.

Tuesday's action came after a study of 37,000 general aviation accidents, which found that airbags protected some crash victims from more serious injuries and that shoulder harnesses cut the risk of death or injury by half.

“Airbags provide an additional measure of protection to pilots and passengers of general aviation aircraft when combined with shoulder harnesses, which the FAA requires in aircraft built after December 1986,” the FAA stated in response to the NTSB's action.

Retrofitting an older plane with two front airbags costs about \$2,000, according to AmSafe, a company that makes the airbags. Unlike automobiles, most aircraft airbags deploy from the seatbelt.



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Small airplane airbag tests

These dynamic crash tests show the occupant of a small plane striking the instrument panel without an airbag and how an airbag would protect the occupant. No audio.