

The OTS and Caltrans remind the public to “Look Before You Lock”

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Vehicle heatstroke is one of the leading causes of traffic-related deaths for children in the United States. Over the past 25 years, 940 children have died of heatstroke due to being left or trapped in a hot car.

As temperatures continue to rise, the California Office of Traffic Safety (OTS) and California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) remind families and caregivers to “Look Before You Lock” and help avoid preventable deaths and injuries of loved ones.

Since 1998, the majority of these tragedies occur when a child is “forgotten” by a parent or caregiver and left in a hot car, and more than half occur at a home. A busy parent or caregiver may unintentionally forget that a quiet or sleeping child, who may also be facing the back of the car, is in the back of the vehicle. Nearly one-third of these accidents occur with children under one year of age. By the end of 2022 alone, 33 children had died due to vehicular heatstroke.

Heatstroke, also referred to as Hyperthermia, can escalate quickly in a hot car. Temperatures can rise 20 degrees in just 10 minutes. At just 70 degrees outside, a vehicle can quickly reach a temperature of over 115 degrees. Individuals, particularly children whose body temperatures rise three to five times faster than an adult’s, can overheat in minutes. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), heatstroke occurs when the core body temperature reaches about 104 degrees.

OTS and Caltrans encourage parents and caregivers to take extra precautions to make sure a child is not left or forgotten in the back seat:

Always lock your vehicle and keep the keys out of reach. About 25% of hot car deaths are a result of children getting into unattended vehicles. Teach the child that a car is not a play area.

Never leave a child alone in a car for any reason. Rolling windows down or parking in the shade does little to change the interior temperature of the vehicle.

Make it a habit to look in the back seat before you exit the car. Keep a stuffed animal, purse, phone or wallet next to the car seat as a reminder.

Check in with a spouse, childcare staff or caregiver when there is a change in schedules to verify the child was picked up or dropped off.

Know the warning signs of heatstroke, which include red, hot and moist or dry skin, lack of sweat, dizziness, nausea, confusion, as well as being irritable or strange behavior.

Heatstroke prevention also applies to pets, who face the same risks for heatstroke when left in a hot car. Keep your pets safe by leaving them at home unless you need them with you. If you see a child or pet alone in a hot vehicle, make sure they are okay and responsive. Act immediately and call 911. A child or pet in distress due to heat should be removed from the vehicle as quickly as possible and rapidly cooled.

For more information on vehicle heatstroke, visit www.nhtsa.gov/campaign/heatstroke. For current data, visit noheatstroke.org.