



Seatbelts in old vehicles

The rules around when seatbelts must be fitted and what type they should be often catches inspectors and LVV certifiers out, especially with older vehicles. The reason is that the rules have changed over time and there are some odd exceptions to consider when assessing the seatbelts. The best solution is to use the tables in Section 7-5 of the VIRM.

The tables state that pre-1955 vehicles don't require seatbelts and as a rule of thumb, 1955 to 1979 vehicles must have at least static 3-point belts (known as lap and diagonal) in front outer seating positions. Vehicles manufactured after October 1979 must have retractor lap and diagonals.

However, there are many exceptions to the basic rules, such as those for some vehicles with tare over 2,000kg or GVM over 3,500kg. Motorhomes, 4WDs and prison vans can also have exceptions.

Classic American cars often encounter issues as 3-point belts were only made mandatory in 1968 in the USA. Most vehicles built from 1955 to 1968 just have lap belts. These vehicles need to have 3-point belts fitted unless there is an applicable exception in the VIRM as follows:

Exception 1: Vehicle may retain OE belts, but replacement belts must be 3-point.

Checking whether the lap seatbelts are original can be difficult as exact replicas of original belts are available. The seatbelt condition and date on the tag are key – if the webbing is pristine it is unlikely to be a 60-year-old seatbelt. Replacement 3-point belts must be LVV certified.

Exception 2: Seatbelts do not need to be fitted if the tare weight is over 2000 kg. Applies to vehicle classes MA/MB/MC/NA built from 1955 to 1979.

There is a reason for the expression 'Yank tank' – a 1960s Cadillac can weigh well over 2000kg so technically would not need seatbelts. Most do have lap belts fitted.



Retrofitted 3-point seatbelts, known as lap and diagonal, in the rear of a 1956 Cadillac.

Exception 3: Vehicles without a structure to fit required seatbelts may have lap or static belts fitted

There are exceptions for convertible vehicles where there is no structure to attach an upper anchorage to. The VIRM also states that a pre-November 1979 class MA or MC vehicle that does not have B-pillars may be fitted with lap belts if the inspector has determined that it is not practicable to retrofit upper anchorages for static lap-and-diagonal seatbelts.



The date on this lap belt in a 1964 Cadillac is February 1993 so not original and would not meet exception 1. However, the vehicle weighs 2,200kg so 3-point static belts are not required – exception 2 is met and the lap belts are acceptable.



The vehicle inspector may accept documentation issued by the LVVTA that an LVV certifier has verified that the vehicle does not have a suitable structure to fit the required seatbelts. This is known as an Upper Seatbelt Anchorage Declaration and includes a declaration by the vehicle owner that they are aware of the potential reduction in safety.

There are other situations where the LVV Upper Seatbelt Anchorage Declaration is used:

The vehicle has structure more than 500mm above the seat cushion, such as a B pillar or roof, but it is not capable of supporting an upper anchorage, or the dimensions or shape of the structure make it unsuitable to install any of the LVVTA-approved upper anchorage designs which are detailed in the LVV seatbelt standard and the NZ Car Construction Manual.



This 60s Chevrolet Camaro had 3-point belts as an option so lap belts are only permitted if they are the original belts. If replaced, the new belts must be 3-point.



A common situation that fits into the above scenario is a pre-1965 American car such as the Ford Fairlane. They were usually not fitted with OE upper seatbelt anchorages, the 2-door version has no B-pillars and the 4-door has very slender pillars that are either not strong enough or not suitable for standard doubler plates. These vehicles and older models are often issued with upper anchorage declarations.

In contrast, vehicles such as the Ford Mustang and Chevrolet Camaro introduced in the mid-1960s are not eligible for an exemption. These models are two-door coupe vehicles with no B-pillar and upper seatbelt anchorages were offered as an option. The roof structure was not altered so any of these vehicles are able to be fitted with an upper anchorage. The upper anchorage exemption cannot be used for these vehicles, either the vehicle retains its original lap belts or 3-point belts must be fitted, usually by replicating the manufacturer's design.

In summary, the rules around seatbelt type are so complex there is no simple answer. The only option is to refer to the VIRM tables and all the exceptions.

This 4-door Cadillac has a roof but without a full B-pillar there is no suitable structure in the permitted area for an upper anchorage. Lap belts are acceptable.