

Free baby car-seats for new parents

- Last Updated: March 07. 2010 12:19AM UAE / March 6. 2010 8:19PM GMT

ABU DHABI // Parents of all babies born in the capital will receive free baby car-seats later this year.

The plan is part of a drive by the Health Authority-Abu Dhabi (HAAD) to educate parents about the risks of carrying their children in vehicles unrestrained. Up to 4,500 seats are to be handed out at every maternity ward in the city for a two-month trial period, which is expected to start in the second half of the year.

“A cultural change has to happen in this region,” explained Dr Jens Thomsen, HAAD’s section head of occupational and environmental health. “From a public perspective point of view, it should not be up to the personal choice of the child if they want to be restrained or not. This is something that the parents have to enforce.”

The health authority also announced that all injury cases, including those of children hurt in traffic mishaps, are to be recorded on a database that will be introduced in all hospitals in the emirate this year. It will provide the first comprehensive picture of both fatalities and injuries to children on the roads.

HAAD’s figures for last year show that 44 youngsters under 17 died on the roads in Abu Dhabi.

Although the UAE does not yet have its own statistics, figures from the US show that for every child who dies in a crash, 171 are injured.

In each hospital, designated staff members will teach parents about the seats, while staff at nurseries will provide similar instructions using demonstration seats.

Depending on the success of the scheme, HAAD may consider making it mandatory that every newborn leaving hospital is carried in a suitable car seat. The rule already exists in certain parts of the US.

Last week, the Ministry of Interior confirmed plans to finalise a federal bill to make child car-seats and seat belts mandatory in 2011, replicating a situation that exists in 46 countries, including Britain, Bulgaria, Namibia and Saudi Arabia.

According to the European Transport Safety Council, 83 per cent of children who are belted or in car seats escape road collisions unscathed.

Yet, according to research gathered at UAE University, 98 per cent of children in the UAE are not restrained when they travel. Last year, traffic accidents accounted for 63 per cent of all child deaths in the emirate.

“Road traffic injuries in the UAE, and especially Abu Dhabi, are a very high priority,” Dr Thomsen said. “In terms of fatalities, it’s the leading cause of injury-related deaths, and the second leading cause of all deaths.

“The population is increasing and so is the number of seriously injured or fatally injured children on the roads. If we don’t stop and reverse the trend we will see more and more of these injuries.”

The seats would be given to all families “regardless of nationality or insurance status”, said Dr Thomsen, and their distribution would be accompanied by a radio, television and newspaper awareness campaign.

“We will decide which path to go down, whether to use shock tactics or not,” he said.

Car seats cost between Dh150 (US\$40) and Dh700 at the retail level. No information was available on what brand of seats will be used.

Amira Wali, the director of public health and communications at the capital’s Corniche Hospital, which delivers 40 per cent of babies in Abu Dhabi, believes that in child safety, education is the catalyst.

“The impact and the potential to prevent harm through trauma and even death is tremendous,” she said. “Any parent who understands the benefit to their child would, no doubt, be fully on board. Awareness is key.”

Having specialist staff trained to educate parents and fit the appropriate seats would be core to HAAD’s campaign, she added.

“It only takes two seconds for something that you never expected to happen that changes your life. Parents are responsible for their children and they need the proper tools to protect them. It is our responsibility to provide these tools.”

Last June, HAAD launched its Drive Safe, Save Lives project, focusing on speed limits and on seat belts for adults. The following month, The National launched its Road to Safety campaign, calling on the Government, drivers, and pedestrians to make the Emirates’s roads safer. The campaign was in response to the deaths of three Emirati sisters who were hit by a car as they crossed Airport Road.