



[U.S. Supreme Court May Allow More Lawsuits Against Car Makers: the Mazda Seat Belt Case](#)

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Earlier last month, on November 3, 2010, the [United States Supreme Court heard oral arguments in the wrongful death case of Williamson v. Mazda Motor of America, Inc.](#) ([hear the oral argument online here](#)). This case is very important to us all because it may well mean that citizens can sue car manufacturers for personal injury and wrongful death even if the cars involved in the accidents technically met federal safety law requirements.

The Williamson lawsuit originates in a 2002 car crash where Thanh Williamson, 32, died while wearing a lap seat belt in a Mazda 1993 MPV minivan. [Mazda's defense](#) is that Williamson was seating in the center position of the rear passenger seat and at the time, the car maker was only required to provide a lap band for this spot per National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) regulation.

And, that's true. The 2000 federal regulations did not require that spot to have a shoulder strap seat belt. However, if one had been provided, Williamson probably would be alive today. And, if the crash had occurred in a minivan manufactured in 2007 or later, that seat would have had more than a lap belt: NHTSA changed its regulations to require this safety feature five years after Ms. Williamson died.

Will the High Court find that federal law preempts state law and rule for Mazda? Will the Supreme Court Justices rule instead that American citizens shouldn't have to face federal law shields by car manufacturers in wrongful death personal injury lawsuits?

Time will tell. Expect a decision sometime in Spring 2011.