

Automakers covered up deadly airbag defect

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After dragging its feet on the question for years, the US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) is urging owners of cars with defective airbags that can explode and injure front-seat passengers to take their vehicles in for repairs. The action involves some 4.7 million cars equipped with airbags manufactured by Takata Corp., a Tokyo-based auto parts supplier.

A faulty propellant inside airbags can easily explode, spraying shrapnel-like pieces of metal onto car occupants. To date, some 139 deaths and injuries have been linked to the exploding airbags, dating back one decade.

The warning covers cars built by Toyota, Honda, Mazda, BMW, General Motors and Ford. The NHTSA said it had been investigating the problem since June and cited six reports of inflators rupturing, causing three injuries.

Meanwhile, Toyota issued a warning, advising owners of several models, including the Toyota Corolla, Matrix, Sequoia and Tundra, to keep passengers out of the front seat until airbags can be repaired. The warning follows a similar action in Japan by four months. Toyota is warning owners of some 247,000 cars in high-humidity areas along the Gulf Coast to make a special effort to get their vehicles fixed. Humidity can apparently increase the risk of malfunction.

Safety advocates are criticizing the NHTSA for permitting auto manufacturers to conduct regional recalls of vehicles, because high humidity can occur in many different areas.

Toyota alone has recalled 875,000 vehicles in three separate campaigns. Worldwide some 2.27 million Toyota vehicles had been affected by the recall as of June. Overall, 14 million vehicles built by 11 different manufacturers have been recalled in the past two years.

The NHTSA action follows a September 29 crash

near Orlando, Florida, that killed a 46-year-old woman, Hien Tran. In that accident, the victim suffered severe neck wounds that could have been caused by metal fragments thrown out by the airbag on her Honda Accord. The Accord is one of the vehicles being recalled. Tran's death is one of at least three that have been linked to the defect so far.

Automakers have been slow to respond as evidence mounts of the seriousness of the defect. Both Honda and Toyota said they did not have enough parts available to repair the airbags. Toyota said that it could disable the airbags, leaving a note for passengers warning them not to ride in the front seat. Of course, passengers would in that case be unprotected in the event of a serious collision.

According to a report in the *New York Times*, the first recorded instance of an exploding airbag occurred in 2004 involving a 2002 Honda Accord. But the automaker did not issue a recall, alert federal regulators or warn customers. In 2008, Honda issued a recall for just 4,200 vehicles, a tiny fraction of the total ultimately involved.

In 2009, Gurjit Rathore, 33, bled to death in front of her three children after the airbag in her Honda Accord exploded when she hit a mail truck in Richmond, Virginia, sending shrapnel into her neck and chest. That same year, Honda recalled 510,000 more vehicles. By August of this year, its recall total had reached 6 million.

The consumer group Center for Auto Safety has called for a criminal investigation of Honda for failing to report accidents involving death or serious injury due to a possible defect as required by law. It noted the extremely low number of reports filed by Honda compared to other automakers and cited two incidents in particular that Honda did not report involving deaths and injuries caused by exploding airbags.

For its part, the NHTSA showed little interest in the

issue of exploding airbags. When it finally launched an investigation in 2009, it was a token effort and ended without any action being taken. In fact, NHTSA closed the case before it even received all the documents it requested. It only finally reopened its investigation in June of this year.

In response to reports that its airbags were exploding, parts maker Takata kept changing its story. Initially, Takata claimed the exploding airbag was only related to a defect affecting Honda vehicles. Last year, Takata conceded that that its airbags posed a danger for drivers of BMWs as well. The recognition of a broader problem led to recalls at nine other automakers including General Motors, Ford, Chrysler and Toyota.

The long delay by Honda and other automakers in recalling vehicles with defective airbags follows revelations that General Motors covered up a deadly ignition defect on several of its low-end models tied to numerous fatal crashes. The automaker knew for more than a decade that the ignition switches could shift easily out of the “run” position, disabling power steering, power brakes and, most importantly, airbags, leaving passengers unprotected in the event of a crash. However, GM did not warn customers or order a recall.

The NHTSA, for its part, abetted the cover-up. It chose to ignore clear evidence of the link between the ignition-switch defect and airbag non-deployment in several fatal crashes it investigated. In the end, the NHTSA slapped GM with a token \$35 million fine and declared its investigation closed.



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