

# Study: Newer vehicles getting safer

David Shepardson    The Detroit News    2:10 p.m. EST January 29, 2015

Washington — The chance of dying when behind the wheel of a newer car is falling dramatically as automakers add high-tech safety features, a report released Thursday finds.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety said death rates for drivers in late-model vehicles fell by more than one-third over three years — but there is a wide range between the safest models and those with the highest death rates.

Gloria Bergquist, a spokesman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, a trade group representing Detroit's Big Three automakers, Toyota Motor Corp. and others, said newer vehicles are safer.

"Today's new vehicles come with many safety advancements, and we urge everyone to consider buying a new vehicle with automatic braking or one of the other advanced crash-avoidance systems," she said.

Among 2011 models, a record nine vehicles have driver death rates of zero. But three cars have death rates exceeding 100 per million registered vehicles.

The nine 2011 vehicles with zero-death rates include the Kia Sorento midsize SUV, Subaru Legacy sedan, Audi A4 4WD, Honda Odyssey, Lexus RX 350 4WD, Mercedes-Benz GL-Class 4WD, Toyota Highlander hybrid, Toyota Sequoia 4WD SUV and Volvo XC90 4WD.

The low death rates may also reflect better driving behavior among owners. Drivers of minivans include many parents who may drive more safely than the population at large. IIHS said eight years ago there were no models with driver death rates of zero.

Vehicles with the highest death rates include smaller cars favored by younger drivers, and a sports car. Many of the smaller cars have fewer safety features and fare poorly in collisions with larger heavier vehicles.

Those with the highest fatality rates among drivers are the Kia Rio had 149 deaths per 1 million registered vehicles; Nissan Versa with 130 deaths; Hyundai Accent four-door, 120; Chevrolet Aveo, 99; Hyundai Accent two-door, 86; Chevrolet Camaro, 80; Chevrolet Silverado Crew 4WD, 79; Honda Civic, 76; Nissan Versa hatchback, 71; Ford Focus, 70; and Nissan Cube, 66.

IIHS said it was not surprising that minicars and small cars dominate the worst list.

"Death rates by vehicle type and size show that the smallest vehicles typically have the highest death rates, and, with some exceptions, death rates tend to go down as size goes up," IIHS said.

The industry-funded group prods automakers to build safer cars through crash tests, ratings and research and credits the improvements to improved vehicle designs and safety technology.

Other changes in recent decades include improved structural designs, new standard side air bags and anti-rollover technology known as electronic stability control.

Vehicles are getting safer as automakers add new standard features, many required by NHTSA. In the past three decades, automakers have been required to add front and side air bags, ejection mitigation protection, stronger vehicle roofs and anti-rollover technology.

IIHS said there were 7,700 fewer driver deaths in 2012 than there would have been had vehicles remained the same since 1985.

The study also shows that SUVs have gotten much safer. A decade ago, SUVs faced significant issues — especially among rollovers, since they are taller and have a higher center of gravity. The adoption of electronic stability control has dramatically lessened the risk of rollover crashes in all vehicles, IIHS said. The rollover death rate of five per million registered vehicle years for 2011 models is less than 25 percent of the rate it was for 2004 models.

“This is huge improvement in just three years, even considering the economy’s influence,” says David Zuby, IIHS executive vice president and chief research officer. “We know from our vehicle ratings program that crash test performance has been getting steadily better. These latest death rates provide new confirmation that real-world outcomes are improving, too.”