

Takata Airbag Flaw Linked to 10th Death; 5 Million More Vehicles Recalled

By HIROKO TABUCHI and DANIELLE IVORY JAN. 22, 2016 The New York Times

Federal safety regulators on Friday said that a man had died in late December when an airbag made by Takata exploded in the vehicle he was driving.

It was the 10th death linked to what has become one of the country's biggest consumer safety problems.

In announcing the death, regulators also significantly expanded the recall of cars containing Takata airbags, adding five million to the 19 million already under recall and extending it to two manufacturers, Volkswagen and Mercedes-Benz, that had not previously been affected.

The twin announcements are the latest evidence that, more than a decade after the first known rupture of a Takata airbag, automakers and regulators are still struggling to understand the scope of the problem.

Millions of cars remain unfixed, yet are still on the road. Overall, 27.3 percent of recalled driver's-side airbags have been replaced and 25.8 percent of passenger-side bags, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Those numbers are higher in regions with high humidity, which are seen as being a higher risk.

Rosemary Shahan, the founder of Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety, said that regulators needed to be more forthcoming with which other cars might be at risk and that automakers needed to be more aggressive in fixing the cars.

"The people who are driving in those cars deserve to know," Ms. Shahan said.

Although the root cause of the defect is still unknown, regulators have focused on the airbags' propellant, which contains ammonium nitrate, a compound that breaks down over time or when it is exposed to moisture. When that happens, the ammonium nitrate can combust violently, causing the propellant's metal casing, called an inflator, to overpressurize and rupture.

Regulators have said that Takata must prove that ammonium nitrate, which is more commonly used in large-scale applications like mining, is safe to use or it will order all airbags containing that compound to be recalled. Takata, the only major airbag manufacturer to use the ammonium nitrate propellant, has said it is safe when properly treated with a stabilizing compound.

But for now, there is no blanket recall, which Gordon Trowbridge, a spokesman for N.H.T.S.A. said could eventually affect "tens of millions" of additional vehicles.

"Many millions of these vehicles are relatively new," Mr. Trowbridge said, "and given what we know about the role of age in degrading the ammonium nitrate propellant, are unlikely to present a rupture risk for some years."

Mr. Trowbridge noted that the agency had prioritized the recalls — which will take years to finish — to account for models and geographic regions that pose a higher risk.

"If N.H.T.S.A. believes a vehicle presents an unreasonable risk to safety, the agency would seek a recall," he said.

HOW THE TAKATA SCANDAL UNFOLDED

- **May 2004**

An airbag explodes in a 2002 Honda Accord. Honda and Takata deem it “an anomaly” and do not involve federal safety regulators.

- **July 2006**

“Happy Manipulating!!!” a Takata airbag engineer, Bob Schubert, writes in an email to colleagues, in a reference to results of airbag tests.

- **November 2008**

After becoming aware of three more ruptures in 2007, Honda recalls about 4,000 vehicles to repair Takata airbags for potential ruptures — the first recall related to the defect.

- **November 2009**

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration opens an investigation into Takata’s airbags. It closes it months later, citing the seemingly isolated nature of the problem.

- **November 2014**

N.H.T.S.A. demands that Takata and automakers expand their recalls to cover the entire United States. Takata does not immediately comply.

- **May 2015**

Takata admits that millions of its airbags are defective. N.H.T.S.A. estimates that more than 19 million vehicles are affected.

- **November 2015**

N.H.T.S.A. announces that it has levied a fine of up to \$200 million against Takata, the largest civil punishment ever imposed in the auto industry.

The latest death occurred when the airbag in a 2006 [Ford Ranger](#) pickup driven by a Georgia man ruptured violently in South Carolina, Mr. Trowbridge said.

It is the first to occur in a vehicle made by an automaker other than [Honda Motor](#), underscoring the defect’s growing reach, and is the ninth fatality in the United States.

The latest recalls affect Audi, Volkswagen, Daimler, [Ford Motor](#), Mazda, Saab, BMW, [Honda](#) and Mercedes-Benz, though Mr. Trowbridge said that list could be updated. A breakdown of how many vehicles were affected from each automaker was not available.

With the addition of Volkswagen and Mercedes-Benz, the roster of major automakers affected by the Takata recalls has grown to 14.

A spokeswoman for Mercedes-Benz, Donna Boland, confirmed that the universe of Takata recalls now included its models. “That said, we are not aware of any incidents in our vehicles,” she said, adding that the automaker would work with regulators.

Volkswagen, which is also embroiled in a scandal over its cheating of emissions testing, confirmed that it had been notified about Takata’s recall filing and that it would cooperate with regulators. It said it was unaware of incidents or injuries caused by these inflaters in its vehicles.

Federal safety regulators had previously asked Volkswagen to provide information about the rupture of a Takata-made side airbag in a 2015 model year Tiguan. However, no Volkswagen vehicles, including the 2015 Tiguan, have been recalled for a Takata airbag-related defect.

The recall of one million out of the five million cars affected was started by the 2014 rupture of a driver's airbag in a Honda City, a subcompact made for the Asian and European markets. The rupture sprayed metal shards into the neck of the driver, who was pregnant. She died, along with her unborn baby. It is the only known fatality outside the United States.