



## Safest Vehicles for Downsizing

- by BENGT HALVORSON, ForbesAutos.com



Amy Fife, a single mother of two, wants to sell her mid-sized sport utility vehicle for something more fuel efficient.

"Years ago I never paid much attention to the price of gas," says the 37-year-old Portland, Ore., administrative

assistant. But with high gas prices and her 10-year-old [Chevrolet Trailblazer](#), which the Environmental Protection Agency estimates gets an average of 16 miles per gallon (14.7 L/100km), she's been noticing an increasing pinch on her budget.

Fife had decided to swap her SUV for a [Subaru Impreza](#), one of the safest small cars on the market and among the 10 highlighted in the accompanying slideshow. But now she's waiting to do it, as she can't find anyone willing to buy her Trailblazer for its estimated market value.

### In Pictures: Safest Vehicles for Downsizing

Although economic concerns make fuel economy a prime focus for car shoppers, safety should be at the top of the checklist as well — particularly for those looking to downsize their vehicle.

We've assembled a list of 10 models with outstanding safety ratings. They rate as "compact" within their respective classes, though some, like the [BMW X3](#) crossover utility vehicle, aren't exactly "small" compared to the tinniest cars on the market. The X3 is, however, smaller and more fuel-efficient than many SUVs. And that makes it a good choice for folks considering stepping down from a full-size SUV.

The same is true of the [Honda CR-V](#) and [Subaru Forester](#), also on our list of safest compact vehicles.

Even if you're considering a vehicle not on our list, there are some key features to look for that can mean the difference between life and death in a collision. Read on to find out what they are.

### Weight Matters


What ultimately matters in a collision isn't a vehicle's weight alone but its difference in weight from other vehicles on the road, says Mike Dulberger, president of Informed For Life, a non-profit safety information organization.

The average weight of a new passenger vehicle — classified as "light-duty" by the government — rose from 3,221 pounds in 1997 to 4,144 pounds in 2007. Ironically, adding more safety equipment over the years — some of it federally mandated — is one of the reasons for the weight gain.



"You don't want to stick out" in terms of size and weight,

Copyright ? 2008  
Yahoo! Canada Co. All  
Rights Reserved.  
[Privacy Policy](#) - [Terms  
of Service](#) - [Help](#)

Help us improve  
Yahoo! Autos - [Send  
Your Suggestions](#) 

Dulberger says, because the more you do, the greater the risk. "With some of the lightest-weight vehicles, you're trading in weight for risk," he says.

Fatality rates are about three times as high for small, light cars than for large, heavy ones, according to national crash statistics.

"That doesn't mean you have to buy a tank," says Russ Rader, a spokesman for the Insurance Institute of Highway Safety. "The benefits of weight start to diminish after a certain point." Anything over about 4,500 is going to be substantially heavier than the vast majority of passenger vehicles on the road, so extra heft beyond that doesn't make much difference when it comes to safety.

"But for the kind of driving that most people do, they should be avoiding the smallest cars," he says. "No matter how many airbags you have, you're still at a higher risk" in the smallest cars.

Jon Linkov, managing editor, autos, at Consumer Reports, agrees. "Bigger will at the end of the day be safer," he says. "However, heavier means lower fuel economy."

### **Savvy Downsizing**

If fuel economy is a top concern, you don't have to downsize to the smallest vehicles available to get improvements in gas mileage. "Consumers can think about downsizing the engine, not the car," Rader says.

Many of the safest mid-sized sedans offer frugal four-cylinder engines that in some cases deliver fuel economy close to that of smaller cars. For example, opting for the four-cylinder engine in a mid-sized [Chevrolet Malibu](#), instead of the larger, more powerful six-cylinder, will actually get you similar gas mileage to the smaller [Chevrolet Cobalt](#), around 10.7 L/100km in the city and 7.8 L/100km on the highway.

"We don't need all of the horsepower that automakers have been pumping into cars for the past 10 years," Rader says.

But if you're set on a smaller vehicle, either for its nimbleness, lower price or higher fuel-efficiency, pay close attention to safety features. "There are some big differences in how well small cars protect you," Rader says.

### **Side-Curtain Airbags**



One way some small cars aren't as safe as others is in

side impacts. Each year, more than 9,000 occupants die in side-impact crashes, most of them from head injuries, according to IIHS statistics.

In analyzing government data on auto accidents, the IIHS has found that side airbags that protect the head, chest and abdomen cut the risk of fatalities in side-impact crashes by 37 percent. Head-protecting airbags are now standard equipment on about 66 percent of all new vehicles.

"Curtain airbags in particular are especially important with small cars," Dulberger says. Like their name implies, these types of airbags typically deploy from the ceiling.

The reason side-curtain airbags are so crucial in small cars is because the cars are lower and lighter than most other vehicles. So, for example, some trucks' bumpers are in line with small-car occupants' heads. This means that if a two-and-a-half-ton pickup t-bones a little hatchback, it could seriously injure the occupants.

In recent years, automakers have made progress in lowering the bumpers and crash structures of some of their largest SUVs, but crash incompatibility is still an issue.

### **Electronic Stability Control**

Another safety feature to look for is electronic stability control, a lifesaving technology that has been found to reduce the risk of fatal single-vehicle rollovers by up to 80 percent for SUVs and 77 percent for cars, and could prevent nearly one-third of all fatal crashes, according to IIHS statistics. By automatically adjusting throttle and braking forces on each wheel, electronic stability control helps prevent skidding and spinning on slippery surfaces or during emergency maneuvers.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's crash-rating system doesn't take into account the role of electronic stability control. But the NHTSA estimates that 10,000 lives would be saved annually if every vehicle had the technology. Electronic stability control will be required on all vehicles in 2012 and beyond.

Many small cars lack the feature, even as an option. "Nobody should ever buy a car without electronic stability control," says Dulberger.

Rader of the IIHS agrees and adds that electronic stability control is even more important in small cars because it can help prevent collisions, as opposed to just protect occupants during an accident, like airbags do. "If you can avoid the crash, that's even better," he says.



But the idea that small cars are more maneuverable and can more

readily avoid crashes compared to larger vehicles isn't substantiated by crash statistics, Rader says. "Small cars tend to get in more crashes," says Rader, even when normalized for driving conditions and types of drivers.

Electronic stability also reduces the rollover concerns that accompany smaller but taller vehicles, especially for so-called crossover utility vehicles that offer versatile, spacious interiors while only taking up the parking footprint of a compact sedan or coupe.

"There used to be a tradeoff with SUVs for rollovers, and that's really dramatically changing due to electronic stability control," Rader says, pointing to the Honda CR-V, [Honda Element](#) and Subaru Forester, all "Top Safety Picks" from the IIHS. With some exceptions, such compact utility vehicles are generally the safer bet today than traditional compact cars, which often share the same underpinnings. That's because their added weight compared to compact cars makes them inherently safer, Rader says, adding that crossover utility vehicles also tend to have more standard safety equipment.

Even compared to all those hulking SUVs on the road, smaller car-based crossovers are often a safer choice, particularly when looking at models like the mid-sized Chevrolet Trailblazer, which have been around for a while and don't have the latest advancements.

"Whether you go to one of these small utility vehicles or a small car, you're going to get better handling, a more compliant ride and more maneuverability," often with better safety, provided you pick one of the vehicles with the best crash ratings, says Consumer Reports' Linkov.

### **Our Top Safety Picks**



To compile our list, we looked at passenger-car and crossover-utility models less than 180 inches long and ruled out those without electronic stability control or side-curtain airbags as standard or optional equipment.

Disregarding any vehicles with less than four stars from the NHTSA or an 'Acceptable' rating from the IIHS in frontal and side crash tests, we selected 10 vehicles with top crash-test ratings, also paying attention to Informed for Life's Statistical Combination of Risk Elements (SCORE), which includes things like weight and rollover ratings and more accurately corresponds to fatality figures than do either the IIHS or

NHTSA results by themselves.

SCORE ratings represent relative safety risk across all types of vehicles, so a vehicle with a SCORE of 50 represents half the fatality risk of a vehicle with a SCORE of 100. For the full ratings and more details, go to [www.informedforlife.org](http://www.informedforlife.org).

See the accompanying slideshow for our list of the safest vehicles for downsizing.

### **[In Pictures: Safest Vehicles for Downsizing](#)**

#### **Related Links:**

[In pictures: Subaru, Keeping You in](#)

[Read a Review: A Little Luxury with Practicality](#)

[In Pictures: See What Subaru Thinks an SUV Should Be](#)

[Read a Review: Ford: Convenience, Reliability, and Perfect for You](#)

[In pictures: Rugged Yet Comfortable fit for Your Family](#)