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Top 10 Safest Vehicles

by Bengt Halvorson

Although the term "safest" might be open to a lot of interpretations, we mean it like this: Which cars are most likely, according to the crash tests and available facts and figures, to keep their occupants from injury or death in an accident? And furthermore, which vehicles best mix accident protection with accident avoidance?

"The common-denominator feeling is that shoppers are overwhelmed" when looking for a safe vehicle, said Michael Dulberger, president of the non-profit safety information organization Informed For Life. "They see four and five stars, and silver and gold, but they're still not sure what's best."



Honda Odyssey crash test

"If I had to characterize the safest vehicle," said Dulberger, "it would be a vehicle with electronic stability control, which minimizes the risk of rollover, and side-impact (or side-curtain) airbags, which greatly increase the chances of surviving a side-impact crash. Generally the vehicles that do better weigh around 4,000 pounds and are passenger cars, because their rollover stability is best."

Dulberger explained that both electronic stability control and side airbags are either standard or optional on most new cars, but many shoppers aren't aware of the difference they can make in avoiding a crash or affecting its outcome.

Top 10 Safest Vehicles

1. **Acura RL**
2. **Volvo S80**
3. **Honda Odyssey**
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5. **Chrysler 300C/Dodge Charger**
6. **Lincoln Town Car**
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Factors that play an especially significant role, statistically, in survival are curb weight, rollover ratings, frontal crash ratings and side crash ratings.

The role of weight in survivability is often misunderstood. While you're not always better off with more weight, generally, all other things the same, fatality statistics show that heavier is safer in a collision with another vehicle. "You can't buy a 2,000-pound car with the same crash ratings as a 4,000-pound car and feel like they're equivalent," cautioned Dulberger.

Rollovers account for about 28 percent of traffic fatalities, so choosing a vehicle with a reduced rollover propensity is very important. In this recently added test, vehicles with a higher number of stars are simply less likely to roll over in a single-vehicle crash. Typically, rollovers are "tripped" by a curb, guardrail or ditch after loss of control, and data has proven that electronic stability control systems can significantly reduce the chances of losing control and getting into a rollover situation.

But vehicles aren't necessarily safer just because they weigh a certain amount, don't have as much of a tendency to roll over and have safety equipment like side airbags and electronic stability control. Frontal and side-impact crash testing, done by two U.S. agencies, helps sort the field.

Both the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) do their front and side testing differently. While the NHTSA collides the vehicle head-on into a fixed barrier at 35 mph, the IIHS sends the vehicle into an offset, deformable barrier at 40 mph. Both agencies run side-impact tests with a car-size barrier bashed into the side of the stationary vehicle; the speed and weight of the barrier varies between the tests, but most importantly, the IIHS tests for head trauma while the NHTSA does not.



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The ratings system that the NHTSA uses is statistically rooted in the chance of serious injury, with five stars being the best for keeping occupants safe. For instance, a five-star rating in the frontal test refers to a 10 percent or less chance of serious injury, while five stars in the side-impact test brings a five percent or less chance. The IIHS ratings method is much easier for the uninitiated to understand: All tests are rated Good, Acceptable, Marginal or Poor. Good means that serious injuries are unlikely, while Poor means that they're probable. The side-impact ratings from both testing agencies can be compared among all vehicles across the board, while the frontal results are only comparable within the same weight class.

To keep this as straightforward as possible, we've selected our Top 10 ForbesAutos.com vehicles based on Informed For Life's list of the safest 2006 model-year vehicles. The group's SCORE (Statistical Combination Of Risk Elements) more accurately corresponds to model-by-model fatality figures than do either the IIHS or NHTSA crash tests on their own, whether or not the vehicle has electronic stability control or any other single factors. With a difference in fatality risk of more than 3-to-1 from the top-ranked vehicle to the bottom, by choosing one of the safest vehicles, you're putting the odds more on your side.

The SCORE is a relative scale, with the average risk for a passenger car targeted at 100. Informed For Life recommends the safest 10 percent of vehicles, represented by a score of less than 70, while vehicles with a score of more than 100 have an above average risk. For the full 2006 ratings and more details, see the organization's website.

Note: NHTSA frontal ratings are listed for the driver's side only, while NHTSA side-impact ratings are listed for the front only.

[Click here to see a slideshow of the safest 2006 vehicles on ForbesAutos.com.](#)

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