

## Problems With Star Ratings

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### Safety Advice

#### A Crash Course in Crash-Test Ratings

Crash Ratings and What They Mean

#### Problems With Star Ratings

#### The Difference Between Trucks and Cars

#### Designing Vehicles for Crash Testing

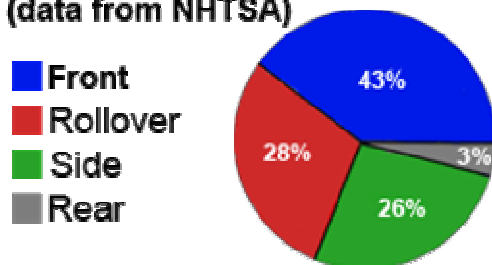
Bumper Heights and Vehicle Compatibility

Accident Avoidance is Key

#### What Can You do With This Information?

In recent years, nearly every vehicle tested has been getting four- and five-star scores, leading many to question the usefulness of the tests in separating the safest cars. The simple reason for this is because automakers have been doing progressively better at the NHTSA's crash tests, but it's been making the agency look like a generous grader and making it harder for shoppers to tell the best from the worst.

### U.S. Traffic Fatalities by Type (data from NHTSA)



In a move that will put safety on the minds of even more shoppers, the NHTSA crash-test ratings are coming to new-car window stickers. Michael Dulberger, president of Informed For Life, a nonprofit safety information organization, is concerned that too many four- and five-star ratings on the stickers may lead to complacency.

“The consumer really has a terrible time understanding the real importance of selecting a safe vehicle, because to the uninformed it looks as if you can't lose,” he said. “Ninety-five percent of the '06 models received four or five stars. The system needs overhauling and there needs to be more differentiation between the best and the worst.”

Dulberger also said that neither the IIHS nor the NHTSA clearly tells consumers which crash ratings are more important. “Frontal impacts account for 43 percent of all fatalities,” he said. “So when you look at crash ratings, you want to put a much higher emphasis on frontal crash performance than rear.”

There are also some serious discrepancies between the two testing agencies' results. For instance, the NHTSA gives the Honda Element a five-star rating in side impact, while the IIHS rates the Element a Poor in its side-impact test.

The IIHS' Russ Rader said that the discrepancy (and others like it) in side-impact performance appears because the NHTSA test uses a barrier that represents the front end of a car, while the IIHS test uses the typical impact height of a light truck. The IIHS exposes a wide variance between vehicles in side-impact performance with its test and its higher point of impact, while the NHTSA test gives almost all vehicles three stars or more, added Rader.

"The Institute's test is more challenging," said Rader. "A vehicle should be able to perform well in both tests, and if it doesn't you shouldn't buy it."

The NHTSA confirmed that its results are often different from the IIHS.

"We do radically different tests than the IIHS for both side and frontal, so the results will be quite different in some cases," said Rae Tyson, spokesman for NHTSA. "Our test uses a barrier that's close to that of an average passenger car. It still represents the greatest proportion of real-world crashes.

"But having said that, the IIHS is rightly concerned about the increasing popularity of light trucks," he said. "You're in a win-win situation because we're doing different tests here, and if you look at both sets of results, then you'll have a good idea of a model's real-world crash performance."

Review of the federal side-impact test is underway at an accelerated pace to develop a new test that would more accurately reflect the injuries that can occur. "As we've learned more, we realize that we're not capturing the likelihood of head injury," Tyson said, noting that a new rigid-pole side-impact standard is being developed, and the new test would account for occupants of various sizes.

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