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Vehicles

Safest SUVs

Bengt Halvorson 10.26.07, 12:01 AM ET



In Pictures: Safest SUVs

The Ford Excursion, the now-discontinued gas-guzzling behemoth that was one of the market's biggest and heaviest sport utility vehicles, has been haunted not only by hordes of environmentalists but also by a driver death rate several times higher than many smaller SUV models.

According to federal fatality data, adjusted for registered vehicle years, the Excursion had more than triple the fatality rate of the smaller Expedition and more than double the fatality rate of the mid-size Explorer.

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Bigger, it seems, is not always safer.

In Pictures: Fifteen Safest SUVs

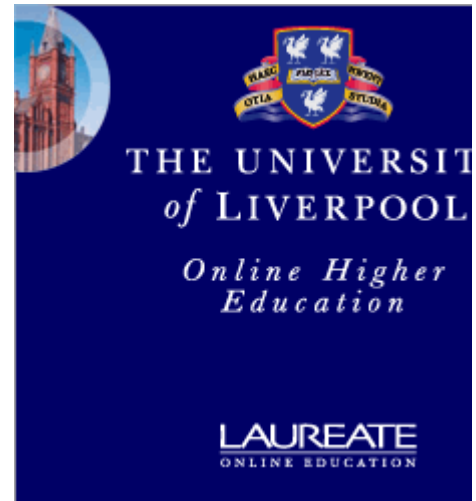
Russ Rader, spokesman for the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), an organization representing the interests of the insurance industry, agrees.

To shield passengers, "you don't have to buy an enormous vehicle," he says. "In this era of high gas prices, consumers should know they don't need a tank to get good protection in crashes."

Winning Wheels

When shopping for an SUV, Ron DeFore, spokesman for the SUVVOA, a Washington, D.C. group representing SUV, pickup and van owners, says

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you should take a look at your needs before deciding on the size of vehicle. Do your homework and you'll find in some cases there is little difference in safety between a mid-size and full-size SUV.

Not planning on off-roading or towing? Then "you should probably concentrate on car-based SUVs," advises Gabriel Shenhar, program leader for *Consumer Reports'* Auto Test Division, who said these so-called crossovers, such as the [Honda CR-V](#), Toyota Highlander, Saturn Outlook, and even BMW X5, will do just fine for most SUV shoppers. They offer ease of seating access, top-notch handling, and roomy interiors.

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Still, safety counts. And no matter what type of vehicle, the most useful information for assessing safety is in the crash-test ratings, according to Rader.

"SUVs have improved dramatically in terms of how they perform in crash tests," he says. As recently as several years ago, he explains, some of the top-selling SUVs ranked near the bottom of their size classes in crash-test safety. Since then, "we've seen a big improvement."

In the latest analysis by make and model, the IIHS found many SUV models are among the vehicles with the lowest fatality rates on the road. According to Rader, that wasn't the case just five or 10 years ago.

"One thing we know is improving the safety of SUVs is electronic stability control," he says. "ESC is the most important safety feature most people have never heard of."

According to the IIHS, electronic stability control is now standard on 87% of all new SUVs, and it can reduce the risk of a rollover by a staggering 85%. What further increases the urgency and importance of ESC, says Rader, is that a rollover "is a particularly deadly type of crash."

That's because "SUVs, by design, have high ground clearance, which increases their center of gravity and therefore their propensity to roll over," says Michael Dulberger, president of the auto-safety advocacy group [Informed for Life](#). "With the very large number of SUVs on the road today, this has resulted in rollovers now being responsible for one-third of all traffic fatalities."

Looking back at the Excursion and its unusually high fatality rate, Rader says it correlates to the Excursion's relatively high rollover risk. Sure enough, data from the organization verifies the bulk of the model's fatalities were in single-vehicle accidents, not multi-vehicle accidents, and many of them involved rollover.

Top Tips

To choose the safest model, Rader recommends starting by looking for vehicles with the top rating in all crash tests, plus those that incorporate ESC.

"Now we have more than a dozen SUVs that have the Institute's highest rating and have electronic stability control. They're not just expensive luxury vehicles," he says, citing examples like the [Honda CR-V](#), [Ford](#)

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Side airbags are another major safety device that's not yet on most vehicles but has been shown to make a significant difference in fatality rates.

"Side airbags aren't required yet, and unfortunately, they're less common on SUVs than on cars," says Rader. Of new cars, 71% have some combination of side bags that protect both the head and chest--the kind all the safety experts we spoke with recommended--while that's the case for only 48% of SUVs.

"The better vehicles are going to have side and curtain airbags, and you'll get three-point belts in the third-row seat," says Shenhar, who added that head restraints with whiplash protection are another feature that separates the safest SUVs from the rest of the pack.

Another especially important consideration for SUVs, according to Shenhar, is accident avoidance, including the effectiveness of the braking system, how nimbly the vehicle can be steered around obstacles in an abrupt lane-change maneuver, and how secure and forgiving the handling is.

Rear visibility can also be a big safety issue for SUVs, according to Shenhar, whether you have small children around or not.

"The rearview camera is so beneficial," he says, adding that on some models, like the Toyota Highlander and Mazda CX-9, you can get a camera system without opting for the costly navigation system option.

To the relief of those who plan to use their SUV for serious hauling, higher load and towing ratings don't necessarily correspond with reduced safety. In fact, one of our Safest SUVs, the [Mercedes-Benz M-Class](#), can tow up to 7,200 pounds.

But shoppers who are considering an SUV because they plan to tow can no longer assume towing ability in an SUV.

"We're seeing this all across the country," says DeFore. "People get a crossover that looks like an SUV, then they go to an RV lot looking to pull a camper or trailer, and they're told all they can tow is a small boat--or that the manufacturer doesn't recommend towing at all."

Behind The Numbers

To find the safest sport utility vehicles, we followed the advice of our safety experts and looked for top ratings in the major crash tests, plus available electronic stability control.

First we compiled a list of SUVs that have earned top five-star rankings for both driver and passenger in National Highway Transportation and Safety Administration crash tests for frontal impact and top five-star rankings for both the front and rear seat in side impact tests.

Of those all-stars, we looked at IIHS crash test results for overall frontal offset, side, and rear protection, and eliminated any models that scored

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lower than the top "Good" rating. We also introduced several models that received across-the-board "Good" ratings for all three IIHS categories but received a 4-star rating in only one instance of NHTSA results.

Next, we weeded out any vehicles that don't offer electronic stability control as either standard or optional. Then we considered the importance of braking, maneuverability, and emergency handling in avoiding accidents by consulting *Consumer Reports* accident avoidance ratings and making sure they were average or better.

Finally, we re-ordered and ranked the vehicles remaining based on the amount of positive crash-test info available, accident avoidance scores, and any standout safety equipment.

In Pictures: Fifteen Safest SUVs

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