



Warren Brown

# Get Smart, *Drive On*

## Rollover Ratings? Just Use Common Sense

You can roll any car, truck or bus. You can flip any motorcycle, bike or scooter. You can trip and fall, or stumble while walking. But you shouldn't throw away your shoes for fear of falling. You shouldn't scrap your motorcycle for fear of flipping; and you shouldn't dump your Chevrolet Blazer, GMC Jimmy or Ford Explorer for fear of rolling over.

What you should do is learn to live with the facts. That is what the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is trying to help you do with its new

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"Rollover Ratings Resistance" list. Some news stories might've led you to believe otherwise. They were top-heavy with exaggeration, causing some of you to panic. Chill out. The truth is much more pedestrian -- something to know, nothing to cause alarm.

First, NHTSA's "ratings" are mathematical estimates of a vehicle's chance for rolling over in a single-vehicle crash, one in which no other vehicle is involved. These ratings are not based on the actual crash experience of vehicles cited, there were no tests to determine if a vehicle "passed" or "failed."

Therefore, technically, no vehicle flunked. None passed. There was one overriding truth, clearly stated in NHTSA's ratings report: "Even the highest-rated vehicle can roll over; but you can reduce your chance of being killed in a rollover by about 75 percent just by wearing your seat belt."

The highest-rated vehicles on NHTSA's rollover resistance list have five stars, meaning that they have a rollover risk of less than 10 percent, according to the agency. The highest-rated vehicles tend to be cars, because cars generally have low centers of gravity. That means they are less top heavy, and thus less likely to flip or roll when "tripped" by a ditch, curb, soft soil or other object.

The lowest-rated vehicles tend to be sport-utility models and other trucks, such as pickups, because they have high centers of gravity. That means they are more top heavy and more likely to flip or roll when tripped. It's common sense. It's general science and Physics 101. The only vehicle receiving five stars in NHTSA's first round of rollover ratings is the 2001 Honda Accord sedan. By comparison, the Chevrolet Blazer and GMC Jimmy got one star - based on the application of the agency's rollover resistance formula. But, as with any calculation, the outcome can be changed by changing (adjusting -RM) an element in the equation. For example, you're

running along in your low-rollover Honda Accord when it gets submarined by a low-slung, wedge-nosed sports car that hits you on the side. You just might roll. (Remember: those "ratings" are for single-vehicle crashes only.) Or, let's say you overload the Accord trunk and strap a pile of stuff to the roof. You thereby render the vehicle unstable, and to make matters worse, you failed to properly inflate the car's tires. What happens to your chance of rollover? It increases, along with the likelihood of fatal injury if you crash without wearing a seat belt.

You can roll anything. The higher the center of gravity, the greater the chance for ending up wrong side up. A good rollover rating is useless in the absence of good common sense. That means you

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are your best defense against turning turtle. To wit: Know your vehicle. Wear your seat belts whenever the vehicle is in motion. Check tire pressure. Drive prudently. Heed the warning labels in trucks and sport-utility models. Those labels, usually located on the driver's visor, advise you not to drive trucks the way you drive cars. For example, don't expect a humongous Ford Expedition SUV to handle like a Corvette or Porsche 911. It won't. You'll flip.

Finally, obey traffic laws, and pray your fellow motorists are obeying them, too.