

Tesla's Takata Problem: Are There Issues with Tesla's Airbags?

Ah, the Tesla: a car buff and energy lover's dream. Gliding smoothly through the streets of major cities, the Roadster and Model S are pointed out in hushed terms of glowing respect and admiration. Those who don't own one yet are probably on waiting lists for 2017's Model 3. But similar to manufacturers BMW, Audi, General Motors, and Mercedes-Benz, Tesla's vehicles contain a crucial flaw: Takata airbags.

For anyone living under a rock during the past few years, Takata airbags have constituted the largest product safety recall in American history. The airbag inflators can deploy with excessive force, sending deadly shrapnel into the driver's face. Over eleven people have died and hundreds have been injured worldwide due to Takata's faulty airbags. It's not a pretty way to die, either. In May, a Texas teenager involved in a low-speed collision bled to death when the airbag inflator in her 2002 Honda Civic launched a piece of twisted metal directly at her neck. It was a minor accident that the teenager should have easily survived.

Unfortunately for the automotive world, Takata airbags are pretty much everywhere. 17 major manufacturers- including Ford, Honda, and Toyota- had used Takata airbags for years. The National Highway and Traffic Safety Association (NHTSA) has already recalled a whopping 29 million vehicles for faulty Takata inflators, with an estimated 85 million more eventually requiring replacement. If the Takata Corporation is found to be criminally negligent their faulty inflators, they could face a fee of up to \$3.5 billion to replace the parts.

At the beginning of this summer, the NHTSA added Volkswagen and Tesla to the list of manufacturers who had used Takata airbags. This was undoubtedly a surprise to Tesla owners, because the Model S is the safest car ever tested by NHTSA. But neither VW nor Tesla have issued mass recalls on their vehicles for lousy Takata airbags, leaving both car owners and the general public to ask: eh, why not? Everyone else did, so why aren't you doing it?

The reason Tesla's not recalling their popular electric cars right now is that their airbags aren't at the highest risk for malfunctioning. According to NHTSA, "A combination of time, environmental moisture and fluctuating high temperatures contribute to the degradation of the ammonium nitrate propellant in the inflators. Such degradation can cause the propellant to burn too quickly, rupturing the inflator module and sending shrapnel through the air bag and into the vehicle occupants." Basically, older vehicles in humid climates are more likely to have faulty Takata inflators than newer vehicles like Tesla's, which premiered back in 2008.

But it doesn't mean that Tesla vehicles won't be recalled further down the road. As NHTSA administrator Mark Rosekind clarified: "This recall schedule ensures the inflators will be recalled and replaced before they become dangerous, giving vehicle owners sufficient time to have them replaced before they pose a danger to vehicle occupants." So keep on enjoying your Tesla for now, but don't forget to take it in a few years from now to fix that airbag problem.