

Stability control another step closer to being standard

Regulators request safety device on all new autos by 2012

By Jayne O'donnell
USA TODAY

Federal regulators proposed Thursday that by 2012 all vehicles be built with a technology that keeps them from veering out of control.

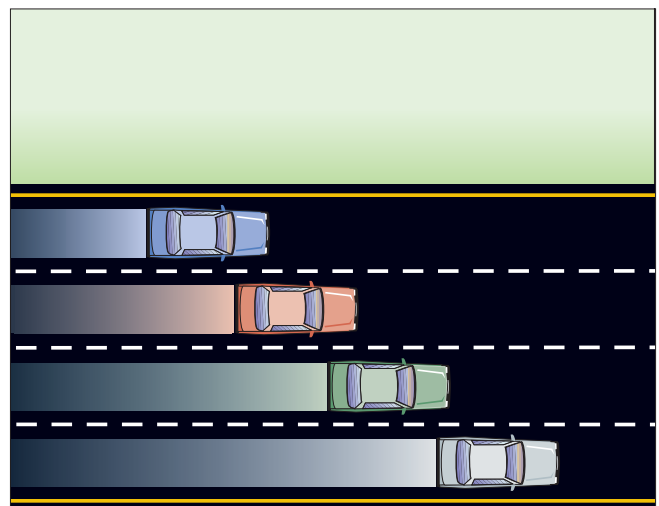
The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says the technology, known as stability control, will save 5,300 to 10,300 lives a year when it is on all vehicles. That would make it the most life-saving safety device since the seat belt, which is estimated to save about 15,000 lives a year.

NHTSA says about 252,000 injuries also could be prevented by stability control.

Stability control makes it "possible to prevent the crash entirely," says NHTSA chief Nicole Nason.

The technology goes by different names — vehicle skid control and AdvanceTrac, among them — on different vehicles. NHTSA said it is on about a third of all 2006 cars and light trucks. Nason says the agency's proposed stability-control regulation will help assure consumers that all systems meet both the government's requirements and performance tests.

Stability control's biggest benefit is its ability to prevent many rollover crashes, which make up about a quarter of the auto fatalities each year. NHTSA says stability control could prevent about 85% of SUV rollovers when just one vehicle is involved and reduce SUV crashes altogether by 60%. One-car crashes would be reduced by more than a third, NHTSA says.



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Such statistics prompted automakers to put stability control on their SUVs first. But after the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety found a third of single-vehicle car crashes could be prevented with stability control, it urged automakers to step up car installation. Stability control is standard on many luxury cars but optional on most more-affordable models. Hyundai, however, is one of few automakers to offer it as standard equipment on a low-priced car.

Automakers spent the last couple of days jockeying to out-promise each other about how fast their fleets will be equipped with stability control. Most manufacturers say they will have it on all of their models by 2010, easily beating the rule's expected deadline. And most will meet the expected phase-in requirement — that 30% of 2009 model-year vehicles must have the technology as standard equipment.

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Nason says she expects to have the final rule out by next spring, beating the deadline set by Congress by two years. She doesn't expect opposition from automakers, given their widespread use of the technology.

The Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, which represents all major automakers except Honda, worked closely with NHTSA in developing the rule.

NHTSA says it will cost automakers a little more than \$100 a car to install the technology.

All current stability-control systems meet the performance test, Nason says, though some earlier versions did not.

Stability control is nearly imperceptible to drivers. But once they see it in action, "People are amazed at what this technology does," says GM safety chief Bob Lange.

How stability control works

Stability control uses sensors to monitor a vehicle's speed and road position. The sensors are linked by computer to the car's anti-lock braking system and engine. The computer activates the brakes, together or one at a time, and slows the engine to keep the vehicle from swerving or skidding that can lead to a rollover.

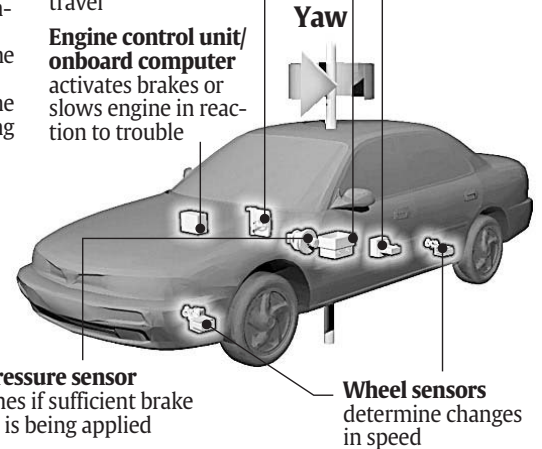
An array of sensors monitor the vehicle:

Yaw rate sensor detects vehicle spin

Steering wheel angle sensor calculates path of travel

Engine control unit/onboard computer activates brakes or slows engine in reaction to trouble

Lateral acceleration sensor measures side-to-side motion



Brake pressure sensor determines if sufficient brake pressure is being applied

Wheel sensors determine changes in speed

Sources: Continental Teves, USA TODAY research

By Robert W. Ahrens, USA TODAY

Discussion:

How does stability control work? Why does the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration want the technology built into all vehicles? What is the biggest advantage of stability control? Why do you think stability control is standard on luxury cars but optional on more-affordable vehicles? Why are automakers motivated to equip their cars with stability control? In your opinion, will future cars be operated by humans or by technology? Explain.

Activity:

In 2003, the NHTSA conducted an in-depth study on vehicle rollovers. In its report, the agency recommended a three-part plan to reduce rollovers. First, the NHTSA proposed vehicle strategies — those, like stability control, that make cars safer. Next, the agency suggested roadway strategies such as adding guardrails or making road improvements. Finally, the NHTSA outlined consumer strategies like educating the public about the problem and its causes. In small groups, choose a problem such as inconsistent seat-belt use or drunk driving that puts teen drivers at risk. Then, develop a three-part plan, including vehicle, roadway and consumer strategies, that will help solve the problem. Suggest at least two strategies per category. Use the graphic organizer on the following page to help organize your ideas.

PROBLEM: _____

VEHICLE STRATEGIES

Describe the strategy.	How will it help solve the problem?
1.	
2.	
3.	



ROADWAY STRATEGIES

Describe the strategy.	How will it help solve the problem?
1.	
2.	
3.	



CONSUMER STRATEGIES

Describe the strategy.	How will it help solve the problem?
1.	
2.	
3.	

