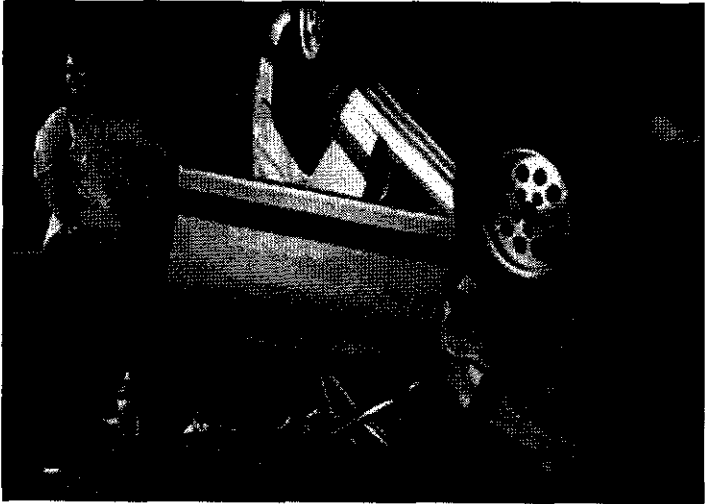


Sport Utility Vehicles May Have High Risk of Rollovers

# Superiorly Unsafe Vehicles

- SUV Safety
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A sport utility vehicle in the aftermath of a rollover. (Chris Seuffer/AP Photo)



ABCNEWS' Jack Smith on the dangers of sport utility vehicles  
944k (avi)  
930k (mov)

By *Emmy Kondo*  
*ABCNEWS.com*

They took the sport utility vehicle because they thought it **would** be safer.

At the end of the 1995 Memorial Day weekend, cousins Beth Sanders and Linda McCathern began driving home in an S W from Osborn, Idaho, to Portland, Ore., with their youngest children. Knowing the roads aren't as safe on holidays, the thirty-something moms decided to take Sanders' year-old Toyota 4Runner rather than McCathern's Honda Accord.

They buckled their toddlers into safety seats and put on their seatbelts. They stopped frequently to stay fresh and alert. But despite their precautions, a tragedy had already been set in motion.

## Faster Than The Blink of An Eye

On a two-lane highway in eastern Washington, an oncoming car drifted into Sander's lane, forcing her to swerve rapidly to the right. She was driving within the speed limit, and managed to keep her car on the road. But on the counterswing to return to her lane, the 4Runner tipped and rolled twice. The rollover has left McCathern,

In April, the NHTSA proposed a strongly worded label warning of the risk of rollover in many SUVs.

Web Link  
[NHTSA Website](http://www.nhtsa.gov)

a 36-year-old mother of three, in a wheelchair for life. She is one of the 165,000 Americans killed or seriously injured in all rollover accidents every year.

A jury awarded McCathem \$7 million. Her attorney used Toyota's own test video to demonstrate a similar 4Runner model tilt onto two wheels in an abrupt turn at about 30 m.p.h.

Toyota is appealing, saying driver error and circumstance, not the 4Runner's design, caused the rollover. But consumer advocates say the rollover that left McCathem in a wheelchair for life was no aberration. While passengers in SUVs are safer than car passengers when two or more cars collide, they are much more likely to die in single-vehicle accidents.

### **Not Your Father's Station Wagon**

The Consumer Union says repeated tests of SUVs have shown consistent problems with stability—a measure for which the federal government has no regulatory standards. Sport utility vehicles' high, narrow stances make them more prone to rollovers, particularly in situations where a driver must swerve and then counterswerve—the type of maneuver required to avoid an obstacle, such as a child running into the street or a box dropped from a truck.

SUVs were originally created as off-road vehicles, not the “station wagons of the '90s,” which is how car companies have promoted them. SUVs are ideal, for example, for negotiating rutted logging roads or descending steep mountain trails in the rain—a type of driving that necessarily occurs at slow speeds. **So** what happens when a vehicle designed for off-road conditions, with a higher center of gravity and higher ground clearance, becomes the family car and enters the urban jungle?

It may be brawnier than smaller cars, but it's not as responsive as they are—and on commercial roadways, where high speeds are the norm and split-second choices are key to defensive driving, they are out of their element.

### **Don't Say We Didn't Warn You**

In April, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration proposed a new, strongly worded label for most SUVs warning of the risk of rollover. While most utility vehicles already have to display cautionary tags, the new labels are brightly colored with graphics and an unmistakable warning: “High Risk of Rollover.” The NHTSA says the rollover rate for SUVs—98 for each one million vehicles every year—is more than twice

that **for** all vehicles (47 for each million).

Rules are also pending to require interior protection for motorists' heads, and beef up standards on roof crush resistance, side-door requirements, and better windows to keep passengers from being ejected.

While carmakers have capitalized on the appeal of SUVs as rugged yet glamorous status symbols—vehicles that will always “win” in collisions with smaller cars because of sheer mass—their ads neglect to mention what even car execs admit: It takes a different set of driving skills to handle an SUV than a car. In a situation where a car might skid or spin out, **an** SUV will roll.

### **Carmakers Focus on Safety Benefits**

Still, U.S. automakers, who now depend on light trucks, minivans, and SUVs as their bread and butter, would rather blame the driver than the car. “You can roll over any vehicle if you **turn** fast enough and abruptly enough,” says Barry Felrice, director of regulatory affairs for the Big Three’s American Automobile Manufacturers Association.

Felrice strongly disagrees that SUVs are more dangerous than less top-heavy cars, and says the overwhelming majority of serious injuries and deaths in *SUVs* are due to the fact that their drivers tend to be younger than those who drive passenger cars. “There’s more alcohol involvement in those rollover crashes and there’s much higher speed.”

But Beth Sanders, and thousands like her—who bought SUVs because they thought their children would be safer in them, regardless of driving conditions—can’t understand that statement. “I was a safe, prudent driver. I wasn’t a risk-taking driver,” she says. Almost **9,000** occupants of light duty vehicles died each year from **1991** to **1994**, and almost **10,000** in **1996**, as a result of rollovers—more than eight times the rate in large cars.

And not all SUV makers agree that the onus is on the driver to avoid rollovers under normal driving conditions. After tests in Sweden showed that a severe double-lane change caused a Mercedes-Benz A-class to roll, Daimler-Benz AG spent \$200 million recalling the cars and re-engineering them to enhance their stability.

Even the Big Three may be relenting from their defensive stance. Chrysler, Ford and GM have all made statements in the last few months that future SUV engineering and design will address not only the stability problems that cause rollovers, but weight distribution and angle-of-impact issues, which affect the injury and fatality rates of passengers in cars hit by SUVs. ■

## Safety Problems with SUVs

Rollovers	Rollover accidents account for about one-quarter of the 42,000 deaths in automobile accidents each year in the United States.
Brakes	Federal safety standards are more lenient for light trucks than for cars when it comes to such measures as stopping distances.
Maneuverability	Designed for off-road use, SUVs are heavier and ride higher off the ground, making them more difficult to control.
Driver Deaths	SUVs are four times as likely as cars to roll over in an accident.

## Best and Worst

Rollovers	<p>Fewest: Ford Explorer, Jeep Cherokee</p> <p>Most: Suzuki Samurai, Isuzu Trooper, Acura SLX</p>
Maneuverability (not all models tested)	<p>Best: Honda CRV (1996), Toyota RAV4 (1996)</p> <p>worst: Ford Bronco II, Suzuki Samurai, Isuzu Trooper (1995-1996)</p>
Driver Deaths	<p>Fewer Than Average: Jeep Grand Cherokee 4x4, Ford Explorer 4x4, Chevrolet Blazer 4x4</p> <p>More Than Average: Nissan Pathfinder, Geo Tracker, Jeep Wrangler</p>

Source: Highway Loss Data Institute and Consumers Union

## What's Being Done

Rollovers	Manufacturers of SUVs identified by Consumers Union as prone to rollover are suing the organization over reliability of the tests.
Brakes	Federal regulations will require all but the biggest SUVs to meet car standards in 2002.
Maneuverability	Government requires manufacturers to provide informational labels to S W buyers, explaining that the vehicles are designed for off-road use and may not handle as well in other situations.
Driver Deaths	Manufacturers respond to safety concerns with design changes.

*Note: Statistics measure driver deaths per 10,000 registered vehicle years for 1991-95 model sport utility vehicles.*

*Manufacturers substantially redesign their passenger vehicles periodically, and,*

*in these cases, results for earlier models with the same name may not predict results for the newer designs.*

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