

Before Your Toyota Is Fixed, Should You Drive It?

Posted: Feb, 11 2010 In an era of bank bailouts and free-falls in housing prices, one more certainty of life has been turned on its end: Drivers of some Toyota models now need to figure out whether it's safe to drive around town in cars once reputed to have the best quality in the world. With apologies to Clint Eastwood in "Dirty Harry," the answer can be best summed up with the line: "Well, do you feel unlucky...?" Toyota recently recalled 2.3 million vehicles in the U.S. so it can solve a problem with sticking accelerators. The recall includes Avalons, Camrys, Corollas, Highlanders, Matrixes, RAV4s, Sequoias, and Tundras (see the list here). In an unrelated but recent recall, Toyota announced that the Prius and Lexus HS 250h models would also fall under a recall for problems with their braking systems. Toyota said that dealerships will start receiving the remedy for the problem this week and owners will be notified to bring their vehicles in. Toyota and most automotive experts will only say that the risk of driving these cars is extremely low. The company's tips on what to do (see table below right) aren't likely to allay all the fears owners have. Toyota will not expressly say that they recommend drivers stop driving their vehicles. Toyota President Jim Lentz has said publicly that he is still letting his family drive their Toyotas. Officially, the company Toyota stopped short of recommending that people continue to

drive the cars, but nor did it recommend that they not do so. It called the problem rare and urged people to contact their dealerships if they have concerns. Federal transportation officials are privately saying that people should drive their Toyotas but should stay alert to potential problems with the accelerators. "There is not enough data to be clear about what you should do," said Don Friedman, an engineer with the Center for Injury Research in Santa Barbara, Calif. Strictly speaking, people should not drive the vehicles, Friedman said. But he quickly added that the odds of an accident due to a faulty Toyota accelerator fall roughly among the normal risks of everyday life. So, there's your answer: while the risk exists, so does the risk that you'll be involved in an automobile accident. Remember, in 2009 there were more than 40,000 deaths from automobile accidents. Only five of those can be attributed to Toyotas with unintended acceleration problems. You'd be better served worrying about all the other issues on the road — from careless drivers on mobile phone to every day mishaps. At these odds, safety experts expect many people to drive their Toyota anyway. "People should not expect every Toyota to have a problem," Friedman said. "The ones that are going to be serious are going to be giving some erratic indications. These things don't just happen instantaneously." Still, Friedman

believes the problem potentially exists in as many as 5 percent or more of the vehicles recalled. At least five deaths and 17 injuries are being investigated for possible connections with unintended Toyota accelerations, according to press reports and safety organizations.

Unfortunately, the problems with faulty accelerators don't occur at a particular vehicle mileage. They are more likely to occur when wear and corrosion have damaged parts and interfered with their interactions, Friedman said. The harsher the normal driving conditions, the more likely the accelerator problem would arise.

Consider these tips if you're going to continue driving your Toyota before it's fixed: Toyota now says it has a remedy for the problem and the redesigned pedals are now being produced at its component supplier. Owners will start to see letters from their dealer this week.

Detailed information and answers to questions about issues related to this recall are available to customers at www.toyota.com/recall and at the Toyota Customer Experience Center at 1-800-331-4331.