

Toyota: Owners can still drive, but watch for warning signs

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By **Chris Woodyard**, USA TODAY

Millions of Toyota owners face a difficult choice in how to react to the sticky accelerator recall: risk driving it or park it.

Three big auto-rental companies cast their votes on Wednesday. Enterprise, Avis and Hertz said they have roped off their Toyota fleets until they can be repaired under the recall.

And the Transportation Department acknowledged Wednesday that it leaned on Toyota to stop selling the eight affected models. The government "informed Toyota of their obligations" after it announced the recall and that "the decision to halt sales was legally and morally the right thing to do," said David Strickland, chief of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

But while it thinks Toyota shouldn't sell new ones, NHTSA thinks it's fine to keep driving one of the affected models if you happen to own one. Owners should "exercise caution," it said in a statement.

The government has taken more drastic action to protect the public from potential transportation danger in the past. In 1979, the nation's airlines were ordered to stop flying the DC-10, a popular jumbo jet of the era, after a crash.

But the Toyota case raises questions of whether expediency is involved.

"It's a practicality issue," says Sean Kane of Safety Research & Strategies. "I have three kids." They've got to get around.

Toyota insists that the cars should give telltale signs before the pedal sticks. It and NHTSA also say drivers can take steps to safely stop if it does.

If you own a Toyota that's under recall, pay careful attention to whether the accelerator pedal action seems rough or is sluggish in returning to the idle position, says Toyota spokesman Mike Michels. Only if someone experiences these problems do they need to stop using the vehicle and contact their dealer, he says.

If the pedal does stick while driving, the owner should apply the brakes, pull over and park safely, shut it off and have it towed to a Toyota dealership.

Only if the car becomes a runaway should drivers try to stop it in motion by shifting into neutral or turning off the ignition.

Outside experts agree the problem is manageable for most drivers.

"These cars aren't dangerous," says Jake Fisher, senior engineer at *Consumer Reports'* Auto Test Center. Drivers shouldn't be overly concerned if their car is on Toyota's no-sell list. Out of the huge number of cars involved, the acceleration issue is "a very rare occurrence," he says.

However, Fisher says it's a good idea for drivers to practice what they'd do in case of unintended acceleration.

Don Friedman, an engineer who works with the Center for Injury Research in Santa Barbara, Calif., says that technically the recalled cars probably shouldn't be driven, "but people take risks every day." If a car hasn't acted erratically, "It's hard to tell them not to drive." Instead, they should "be more suspicious and careful in how they drive."

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