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THE LATEST ON CARS, CULTURE, AND DRIVING

Cars' safety systems are getting a whole lot smarter

Automated safety systems are starting to have a real effect in protecting passengers and limiting accident damage, regulators and insurance industry experts say.

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Autonomous driving is packed into the safety features on cars including Mercedes' flagship S550 sedan. (Mercedes-Benz, Weick / September 21, 2013)

Graphic: Auto safety

By Jerry Hirsch
September 21, 2013 | 5:00 a.m.

The big, black Mercedes-Benz is going 70 on the 101 Freeway making minor steering adjustments to hold the lane. I have taken my hands off the steering wheel. A computer is driving.

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A system that comes on the Volvo XC60 sport utility vehicle has even better results, reducing the types of crashes that occur in city traffic and parking lots. It slashed injury claims more than 33%.

"That is a huge number," said Matt Moore, a vice president at the institute.

Front-to-rear crashes are the most frequent on the road, so the systems could make a huge dent in injury totals, Moore said. Eventually, that should make insurance rates lower for cars with these safety features.

Other systems merely aid the driver, such as headlights designed like eyeballs that track turns in the road. These steerable headlamps turn in the same proportion a driver turns the steering wheel.

A Mazda system called Adaptive Front Lighting has reduced property claims frequency by more than 10%. Similar systems have lowered claims 9% in some Volvo cars and about 5% in certain Mercedes and Acuras models.

The latest safety technology relies on a suite of technologies working together, including radar, stereoscopic cameras, ultrasonic sensors, lasers and infrared cameras. Given the complexity, it's no surprise that drivers are seeing some glitches.

Cars with adaptive cruise control — the system that tracks vehicles ahead — can be prone to an odd hiccup. Driving at highway speeds on curvy roads, the sensors could mistake a vehicle in the next lane for a vehicle directly ahead, causing the car to slow unnecessarily. This isn't unique to Mercedes and has cropped up in our tests of Honda Accords and other cars with adaptive cruise control.

Cars equipped with automatic braking can be similarly fooled. Say you are following a car that flashes its right blinker before turning into a McDonald's. You know the car is turning, so you don't hit the brakes. The forward collision system has no idea the car is turning, so it triggers the brakes, thinking it is saving you from yourself.

On a drive from Los Angeles to San Francisco on Interstate 5, the Acura MDX lane-keeping system

After maybe 10 seconds, the steering wheel icon on the dash turns bright red, as if to say: Dude! Hands back at 10 and 2.

Forget about Google Inc.'s self-driving Toyota Prius, jammed with technology only a legion of Caltech professors can understand. Autonomous driving is already here on cars in dealer showrooms. It's packed into the safety features on this \$100,000 flagship S550 Mercedes sedan; on the new Acura MDX sport utility that sells for half that price; and on less expensive vehicles such as the Ford Fusion, which can parallel park itself.

We're still a long way from sending unmanned cars to the grocery store, but automated safety systems are starting to have a real effect now in protecting passengers and limiting accident damage, according to regulators and insurance industry experts.

Such systems can alert drivers to an impending rear-end collision — and slam the brakes. They can stop a vehicle from hitting a post as it backs up. They can track the speed of the car in front, adjusting to maintain a safe distance. Some warn a driver when a car is about to wander out of its lane, and steer it back on course. Another system automatically adjusts headlamps to better illuminate turns.

"We think these systems can make a huge difference in saving lives," said David Strickland, chief of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Forward collision avoidance systems, which automatically hit the brakes and tighten seat belts, have reduced property damage claims on some Mercedes and Acura models 14%, according to the Highway Loss Data Institute, an Arlington, Va., organization that analyzes crash data for the insurance industry. More important, they lowered bodily injury claims — in which the driver of one car is accused of hurting someone in another — by 16% in the Mercedes and 15% in the Acura.



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proved easier to use and more fluid than the Mercedes version.

The challenge for automakers is to find the balance between effective and irritating, said Steve Kenner, global director of Ford's Automotive Safety Office. That's one reason Ford hasn't added automotive braking to its forward collision warning system.

Still, Ford is working to get more driver-assist technologies into vehicles such as its Fusion SE, a mid-priced family sedan.

Adaptive cruise control with forward collision warning adds \$995 to the price of a Fusion SE that starts at \$23,855. The parking system, which includes a sensor that alerts a driver about to back into another vehicle or object, is an \$895 option. A package that includes the parking system, blind spot warning and lane keeping costs \$1,100.

"We try to bundle the things that customers want the most, but at the same time not force them to spend more than they want to," said Samantha Hoyt, Ford's marketing manager for the Fusion.

About 70% of Fusion buyers are spending \$295 to buy just the reverse sensing system and a back-up camera. About 20% are buying the package with the blind spot warning and lane keeping system.

Mercedes-Benz, by contrast, is making some of these systems standard equipment on new models. That includes features such as collision warning — without automatic braking — and "Attention Assist," which senses when a driver is distracted or drowsy by monitoring body movements.

Automatic braking comes in an optional \$2,800 package that also includes the lane keeping feature and other safety systems. The systems on the flagship S550 will also be offered on the Mercedes-Benz CLA, a small sedan that will be available this month starting at about \$30,000.

Making some of these features standard will probably encourage other automakers to do the same, said Bart Herring, Mercedes-Benz U.S. general manager of product management.

Expect even more sophisticated safety systems to follow.

"Once you have the cameras and once you have radar," Herring said, "the engineers can judge what is possible to get to accident-free driving."

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