

ROAD TO SAFETY

Airbag Fraud: What You Don't Know CAN Hurt You



(NAPSA)—It's 7 a.m. Dreary skies with a light drizzle. You're on your way to work when another motorist runs a stop sign. The vehicle appears in front of you milliseconds before the impact. As the shock dissipates, the first thing you notice is the airbag, inflated in front of you. Aside from minor cuts and bruises, you're okay. The airbag just helped save your life.

But what if it didn't inflate?

Airbag fraud is a growing problem that comes with potentially serious consequences. After an accident, the most unscrupulous of shops may steal your non-deployed airbag or not use a new one when needed, choosing instead to reseal the old cover to look new or installing a fake airbag cover in place of a real bag. Another problem involves the use of salvaged airbags when new, original equipment manufacturer (OEM) airbags were specified for the job. In any case, the shop charges your insurance company for a new OEM unit it never bought, leaving you with an empty cavity or a salvaged bag that might not work at all.

"This is something we're really concerned with," said George Gilbert, crash parts merchandising manager at Ford Motor Company. "There are many factors that can affect the integrity of a salvaged airbag, everything from age and weathering to how it was removed. There's just no way to

tell if it's a good bag or not."

Ford Motor Company believes that only new OEM airbag systems and components should be used to repair damaged vehicles.

"Salvaged airbags can come from a number of sources, but airbag systems are vehicle specific, and they work in conjunction with all the safety systems of that vehicle," said Gilbert. "It's possible to have a bag designed for one specific application fit different vehicles, but it may not function properly in those circumstances, if at all. And when it comes to safety, you don't want to be second-guessing whether or not the bag is going to work."

Whether the airbag is missing or nonfunctional, the consequences can be deadly. On Valentine's Day 2003, a 50-year-old nursing assistant was killed after she struck another vehicle on a Seattle highway. An investigation found the driver-side airbag in her 1998 Toyota Corolla never deployed—because there wasn't one. Instead, the original airbag cover had been carefully resealed without anything inside it.

"This kind of tragedy should never happen," said Gilbert. "We're not just talking about a bottom line here, we're talking about people's lives."

Here are some tips to help ensure your vehicle has a fully functioning airbag system:

• **Fake airbag covers often have distinguishing features.**

Many of them are a slightly different color from the surrounding interior, whereas OEM replacement airbags are typically a virtual match. They may also have a blank spot where a factory logo belongs.

• **Look for an airbag light when you start your vehicle.**

Most airbag-equipped vehicles go through a self-diagnostic test when the ignition is turned on, causing the airbag light to glow or flash. If you don't see this light when you start your vehicle or if it doesn't go off after a few seconds, there could be a problem.

• **Learn the history of your vehicle.** Even if your airbag light functions properly, a problem could still exist. Look for previous accidents or flood damage in your vehicle's history report. If you have concerns about your airbags, most dealer repair shops can run a thorough diagnostic test to determine their actual condition.

• **Do NOT inspect the system yourself.** Airbags are generally very sensitive and should only be inspected by trained personnel.

• **Make sure it's fixed right.** If you do have an airbag problem, take it to a dealer repair facility immediately and make sure any damaged items are replaced only with new OEM parts.

By following these tips, you can help ensure your vehicle's safety systems spring into action when you need them most.