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Safety first

A new survey yieldssome surprising results.

By [Jim Motavalli](#)
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The Environmental Protection Agency released its annual Fuel Economy Guide last week and the Sierra Club's Dan Becker said the results documented "most automakers are failing to use gas-saving technology to cut oil addiction, global warming and gas costs."

Hyundai's Santa Fe: middle of the pack results.

That's certainly true. The industry is easily capable of making family vehicles that get 40 miles per gallon, but the average SUV gets 21 mpg combined, and the best (a Ford Escape hybrid) achieves only 34 mpg.

But, if you read this column regularly, you're aware today's cars get poor marks for fuel economy, partly because they're so big. You're probably less aware your own huge road warrior (I'm guessing) is not making you safer.

There's a really interesting Web site at www.informedforlife.com. Set up by retired Avon, Conn., mechanical engineer Michael Dulberger, it is a smart synthesis of crash tests and other data compiled by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (which adds the head injury component the federal agency lacks).

Dulberger's own unique ratings rank crashworthiness (how the vehicles do in crash tests), maneuverability (tendency to roll over) and compatibility (what happens when they crash into other vehicles). By carefully weighing these factors and ranking cars with safety scores, he came to some startling conclusions: You have to go down to No. 16 to get to the safest SUV, the Ford Freestyle (not even a big one).

I asked Dulberger why this was so, and he replied emphatically that large SUVs have high rollover risk, which offsets relatively good compatibility marks. In other words, if you're hit by another car you'll probably make out well, but if you take a corner too fast on a rain-slicked road you could end up dead. One-third of fatal accidents are rollovers.

Informedforlife.com says the safest two vehicles on the road in the 2007 model year are both minivans: the Hyundai Entourage and the Kia Sedona. Then come the three passenger cars, Lexus ES350, Acura TL and Acura RL.

I drove two SUVs this week, the Jeep Compass and the Hyundai Santa Fe Limited, and was curious how they fared in the safety rankings. Well, these smaller SUVs don't flunk the test, but they're not stars, either.

The Santa Fe is ranked No. 48 on the chart. The best category is "low risk," and this SUV is merely "below average risk." Helping it along are both side-curtain airbags and electronic stability control (ESC). The Jeep Compass comes in at No. 110, still "below average risk." It also has the airbags and ESC. These SUVs both have relatively high rollover exposure, according to the Web site (37 for the Hyundai, 34.9 for the Jeep).

The Jeep and Hyundai look somewhat better in the federal rankings. The 2007 Santa Fe got five-star rankings in frontal and side crashes while the Compass got fours in frontal crashes, five in side impacts. Dulberger says there's a somewhat larger gap between four- and five-star ratings than is obvious to the public.

Many vehicles aren't rated by Informedforlife.com because of insufficient data, but among the large SUVs and pickups classified "above average risk" are certain iterations of the GMC Yukon, the Nissan Titan and Frontier and the Toyota Tacoma. Of the bottom five on the list, four are SUVs.

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