

CELEBRATING



FOR SAFER CARS

FEBRUARY 1997- FIRST EURO NCAP CAR SAFETY TESTS SHOCK CONSUMERS AND THE MOTOR INDUSTRY

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The first Euro NCAP crash tests, published in February 1997, sparked a political storm. They revealed, for the first time, hidden weaknesses right at the heart of popular, top-selling family cars in the UK and in Europe.

Until the birth of Euro NCAP, consumers had to rely on manufacturers’ own claims for how much protection a car would offer in a crash. But it was becoming clear that laws governing the safety levels of cars were no guarantee of how a vehicle would perform in a real-world crash. Nor was it possible for consumers to compare the safety credentials of one car with those of a rival model.

In 1997, however, Euro NCAP gave consumers the power and confidence to make their own, informed choices for the first time ever.

At an independent crash test laboratory, seven ‘super-mini’ cars were subjected to three different, exacting tests - a frontal impact at 64km/h, a side impact at 50km/h and pedestrian safety tests. Each test was scientifically-formulated, minutely monitored, filmed and analysed - and designed to represent actual accidents as closely as possible.

The seven cars were fitted with sophisticated crash test dummies to reveal what would really happen to adult passengers or the driver in a collision, and were initially scored out of a potential maximum of four stars.

The results shocked consumers, car manufacturers and safety experts across Europe. Only the Ford Fiesta and Volkswagen Polo managed to achieve three stars based on protection levels offered to adult occupants. The top-selling Rover 100 (formerly the 'Metro') achieved just one star while the Fiat Punto, Nissan Micra, Opel/Vauxhall Corsa and Renault Clio achieved only two stars.

The results were not especially good news for any of the manufacturers – even though each of the cars met all standards required by law. In the Fiat Punto frontal test at 64km/h, the passenger compartment was discovered to be 'unstable owing to failure of the spot welds on the front door pillar', there was 'excessive' movement of the steering wheel while in the side-on crash, chest protection was 'weak'.

When the Nissan Micra was crash-tested, the frontal impact revealed 'excessive intrusion of the footwell' and in the side-impact test it 'failed to meet the abdomen requirements'.

The Opel/Vauxhall Corsa suffered 'excessive' footwell intrusion in the frontal impact, resulting in 'marginal' protection for the passenger's feet and ankles. In the side impact crash, the Corsa's abdomen protection was 'weak', the test revealed. In the Renault Clio frontal test, head protection was 'marginal' and chest protection 'weak'. In the side impact, chest protection was 'poor'.

Even the three-star Ford Fiesta had 'problems for the lower limbs' while feet and ankle protection was 'weak'. In the case of the Volkswagen Polo, intrusion of the footwell was 'excessive' in the frontal crash, while in the side impact test, loading on the dummy's top rib was 'poor'.

The Rover 100 results were the most shocking of all, sounding the death knell for this popular car. Experts gave it only one star because of serious problems with excessive movement of the steering wheel, 'excessive intrusion' of the passenger compartment - and because the driver's door split apart. After the crash, the driver's door could only be opened using tools, while damage to the dummy's rib revealed that side protection was 'poor'.

The level of protection offered to pedestrians was alarming too: not one car was deemed safe enough to merit more than two stars.

Leading motor manufacturers retaliated by claiming the tests were so severe that no vehicle was capable of scoring the then maximum of four points. Despite this, Volvo's S40 became the first four-star car for occupant protection just five months later. Alarmed by the crash test results, Rover took the Rover 100 out of production in 1998. Sales had plummeted since the Euro NCAP results were published.

"The results made extremely uncomfortable reading for the motor manufacturers," said Edmund King, AA President. "They knew the game was up - never again would consumers have to rely only on car-makers' word for how safe their own cars were. The Euro NCAP tests revealed the glaring inadequacies at the heart of these popular family cars in one fell swoop and it changed consumers' buying patterns for ever."

Added Mr King: "It wasn't too long before car-makers backed Euro NCAP – they didn't want to find themselves in the position that Rover were in with consumers, with the Rover 100."

How Euro NCAP was born

It was only due to the dogged persistence of leading figures in the fields of car safety and politics that the Euro NCAP test programme came about in the first place.

Since the 1970s a number of European governments had been working, through the European Experimental Vehicles Committee (EEVC), on assessing car safety. They devised stringent crash test procedures but in 1994, proposals for the adoption in European legislation of the EEVC test proposals were being strongly fought by the car industry.

As a result, in June 1994, the UK Department for Transport considered establishing a 'New Car Assessment Programme' (NCAP) and the following year the European Commission discussed the proposals. In 1996 the Swedish National Road Administration (SNRA), the Federation Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) and International Testing joined the programme and Euro NCAP came into being.

From the outset, members wanted to ensure that testing and assessment was scientifically developed. It was also decided that the tests would be carried out to a higher standard than demanded by legislation.

After the Volvo was awarded four stars, as cars with good ratings improved their sales and as Euro NCAP tests received a flood of publicity, they soon gained credibility with the car companies' own safety engineers.

As automotive manufacturing bosses saw the advantages of an independent assessment that would guide car safety design - putting all car makers on a level playing field - they began to support the programme.

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