

'I'm not asking you to wait till next week': Check for car recalls, police say after teen's death

Check for car recalls, police and family urge after teen killed by air bag following minor crash

By Emily Foxhall | April 7, 2016



Photo: Houston Chronicle

Deputy Danny Beckworth, who investigated the site after a minor accident, shows part of the air bag that killed Houston teen Huma Hanif last week.

With parents who don't speak English well, 24-year-old Faizan Hanif handles the mail for his family. He doesn't remember ever receiving a recall notice about the Takata air bag inflator in the 2002 Honda Civic that his little sister drove.

The notice might have saved the 17-year-old's life. Huma Hanif died after the air bag deployed last Thursday in a relatively minor crash, sending several small pieces of metal flying from the inflator, one of which lodged in her neck and killed her.

The incident has brought renewed attention to a long-standing and widespread problem that critics say both Takata and car manufacturers failed to address appropriately as it snowballed. About 28.8 million air bags like Hanif's are under recall, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Of those, 7.5 million - less than 30 percent - have been repaired.



The numbers represent the largest product recall in U.S. history, agency spokesperson Bryan Thomas said.

At issue is the use of ammonium nitrate in the air bag inflators. Takata is the only inflator-manufacturing company that uses the volatile component.

If the inflator doesn't work correctly when the airbag deploys, the reaction can be like a small bomb going off, with the airbag deploying too forcefully and metal pieces from the inflator flying out like small projectiles.

In Hanif's case, four small metal fragments that punctured or burned holes in the bloodied airbag were found, including the one that remained in her neck when investigators arrived.

Thomas said the air bag problems have been more common in areas with high humidity and temperatures - like Houston.



Recalls on Takata inflators began in 2008, Thomas said. The air bag inflator for Hanif's car was recalled in 2011. Honda says multiple recall notices were mailed to the vehicle's current registered owner.

The law requires manufacturers to send letters with certain wording, but the NHTSA agreed with critics that more could be done to reach vehicle owners, since traditional efforts - as in the Hanifs' case - sometimes aren't enough.

"We are not satisfied on this issue until there is a 100 percent recall," Thomas said.

Recall challenges

When recalls happen for older cars like Hanif's, it gets harder to track down the owners, said Sean Kane, president of Massachusetts-based Safety Research and Strategies, a research and consulting firm that focuses on motor vehicles and consumer parts. (Faizan Hanif said he couldn't remember where the family bought the car, which his mother used to drive.)

Manufacturers may be relying on old data; owners might not have a relationship with a dealer; and, especially if someone doesn't have a good command of English, the urgency and problem may not be appropriately conveyed, Kane said.

Moreover, even when an owner takes a vehicle in to be fixed - a service provided for free - the manufacturer may not have the parts to replace the faulty air bag.

In a statement, Honda said it currently had "sufficient supplies of replacement inflators" for vehicles under Hanif's recall.

And while Honda had stepped up its efforts - doing phone banks and sending out more details and overt warnings about the hazard - Kane called the effort "too little too late."

"Certainly too little too late for this family," he said.

Not a major crash

On the afternoon of the accident, Hanif had dropped off a friend and was heading to her job at Subway.

But her start time of 4:30 p.m. came and went. Store manager Cassie Simpson, who hired her two years ago, said she began to worry something was wrong. Huma Hanif was never late.

Direct, strong and high-energy, the teen was one of her best workers, recalled Simpson, 33. Customers loved her. She had lots of friends, who seemed like sisters, and was excited to graduate, hoping to travel in the months after.

"This is our family, and it's not complete without her right now," Simpson said. "No one can ever fill her shoes."

The night before her death, the senior at George Ranch High School was filling out financial aid forms to attend Wharton County Junior College, her brother Faizan said. She thought of studying nursing.

Huma was the one in the family who could make them all laugh, he said.

"It's just hard to lose her," he said, standing before a crowd of media cameras, his face stoic.

Minutes away from her job, a failure to control speed caused the crash, Fort Bend County Sheriff Troy Nehls said. Investigators ruled out that Hanif had been using a cell phone while on the roadway, where the speed limit is 50 mph, but believed some sort of distraction was involved. She struck an SUV stopped in the two-lane roadway behind another vehicle turning left.

Still, speed didn't kill her.

Deputy Danny Beckworth, who investigated the crash as he has hundreds of other crashes, said it was the sort of incident from which everyone should have been able to walk away.

"This inflator failed," Beckworth said, holding up the part from her car at a news

conference Thursday morning.

'An epidemic'

At the conference, Nehls joined Hanif's brother in urging members of the community to check for possible recalls on their vehicles in order to prevent more incidents.

"Our message today is to re-engage the community, bringing awareness to vehicle recalls," Nehls said.

Nehls said that one of his own employees had found his 2008 Ford Mustang was under recall with information available on the website SaferCar.gov.

"Go to that website," Nehls urged. "I'm not asking you to wait till next week."

Recalls on Takata air bags may continue in coming years, and attorney Wesley Ball says he hopes they will come to include every ammonium nitrate air bag they made.

"There are so many of these air bags out there," said Ball, a partner of Houston-based Farrar and Ball, who works largely on automotive defect cases. "It's literally an epidemic."

And as the recalls continue, he said, some percentage of owners will never get the notice about the air bags. Ball said he wouldn't wait to remove a Takata air bag.

"It's hard to recommend to someone to take a safety component out of your car," he said. "If my daughter was driving a vehicle that had a Takata air bag in it, and that was the only option that she had, I would take the air bag out."



Emily Foxhall

Reporter, Houston
Chronicle