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Skidding out of control - why British cars are potentially the most dangerous in Europe

British motorists are being offered cars with less life-saving anti-skid technology than in Latvia or Lithuania, the RAC Foundation has warned.

They are also worse off than customers in the rest of Europe or the USA for the levels of the safety equipment fitted as standard.

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Road crashes could be reduced by more than 20 per cent - especially in wet or icy conditions - if cars were fitted with anti-skid Electronic Stability Control (ESC).

This would save up to 400 lives a year in the UK and up to 4,000 across Europe, says the RAC.

But just 55 per cent of new cars sold in the UK fit the anti-skid devices as standard compared to 76 per cent in Denmark, and 65 per cent in Latvia and Lithuania.

The warning comes as European Commission considers making the anti-skid technology compulsory on all cars in the EU.

The RAC says that in the UK alone, if 90 per cent of cars were fitted with ESC it would save 400 lives and prevent 3,000 serious injuries each year. Europe wide it could save 4,000 lives and 100,000 serious accidents.

Campaigners are to press the European Commission to back compulsory anti-skid technology when they launch their Choose ESC! campaign at the Bridgestone European Testing ground near Rome on Tuesday, May 8.

The stability control systems dramatically reduce the chances of being involved in an accident by helping drivers to maintain control of their vehicles.

If a driver misjudges a corner or swerves suddenly to avoid an obstacle, stability control can help avoid a skid and can turn an accident into a near miss. Stability control evolved from other technologies such as traction control and anti-lock brakes.

Sensors feed information to a black-box computer which determine whether or not the vehicle is losing control.

If it is, the system applies a small amount of braking to whichever wheel is needed to help stabilize the course of the vehicle.

Some systems also adjust the power of the engine to help further.

The systems kick in faster than even the best driver could manage so that drivers may not even know that the system has intervened.

Studies in Sweden show an overall reduction of 22 per cent in crashes, rising to 32 per cent just in wet conditions.

And a study in Japan has suggested a decrease in accident involvement of some 30 to 35 per cent. American and German studies have also shown positive results.

On all cars sold in the UK, 55 per cent have ESC as standard, 22 per cent as an option and on 23 per cent it is not available.

This compares to Denmark which offers ESC as standard on 75 per cent of cars, an option on 8 per cent and not available on 16 per cent.

In Latvia the figures are 65 per cent, 16 per cent, 19 per cent. Ireland has the lowest proportion of cars with ESC as standard with just 52 per cent, 18 per cent as an option and on 30 per cent of cars it is not available.

On superminis sold in the UK, 8 per cent have anti-skid ESC as standard, 41 per cent as an option and on 51 per cent it is not available.

Edmund King, executive director of the RAC Foundation said: "Electronic Stability Control should be standard on more cars in the UK and Ireland.

"It seems odd that more cars sold in parts of Eastern Europe have these safety features fitted as standard than cars in the UK.

"We are particularly concerned that ESC is not available in over half of all superminis bought in the UK. These smaller cars tend to be bought by the more vulnerable younger drivers who arguably need this protection most."

Max Mosley, president of the international automobile federation FIA, of which the RAC is a member, said: "There is no doubt that anti-skid ESC technology could contribute significantly to the European Union's goal to halve the number of road traffic fatalities by 2010.

"But to achieve this, much more needs to be done to inform the consumer about why they must choose ESC when buying a new car."

In a letter sent to Wolfgang Tiefensee, president of the EU Transport Council, and Gunther Verheugen, Commissioner for Enterprise & Industry the FIA urges the EU to act to boost anti-skid technology in cars.

They warn that by 2010 - the year in which the EU aims to reduce road traffic fatalities by half - the use of anti-skid technology in the US will have reached 82 per cent of new vehicles while in the EU it will amount to only 61 per cent.

At the moment anti-skid technology is usually only available as standard in the luxury end of the car market, and as either an option or not at all in smaller cars which form the bulk of vehicles.

The FIA calls for tax incentives to boost the take-up of the safety technology in smaller cars.