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Road accidents Story

Car computer sensors bring dramatic reduction in crashes

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Vehicle sensors that keep drivers on the straight and narrow have dramatically proved their worth in reducing crashes.

An analysis of more than 200,000 road smashes throughout New Zealand and Australia has found that drivers with electronic stability control systems were 32 per cent less likely to suffer single-vehicle injury crashes than those having to rely entirely on their own reflexes to avoid harm.

The study, published yesterday by the Monash University Accident Research Centre in Melbourne, found cars equipped with such devices were involved in 28 per cent fewer single-vehicle injury crashes between 2001 and 2005 than those without them.

Occupants of four-wheel-drive vehicles fitted with the devices were 66 per cent less likely to be involved in single-vehicle injury crashes.

The study's authors said the effectiveness of stability control systems in reducing smashes involving more than one vehicle was not clear from their preliminary analysis.

But Land Transport NZ said the study pointed to significant benefits from accelerating the introduction of stability devices in this country, given that single-driver crashes accounted for almost 30 per cent of smashes involving light passenger vehicles here. That compared with 15 per cent in Australia.

The Ministry of Transport estimates that 136 of the 391 people killed on New Zealand roads last year were victims of loss-of-control crashes.

Although more than 60 per cent of new vehicles are now sold with electronic stability control systems, Land Transport chief executive Wayne Donnelly said hastening their introduction was a priority: "This study confirms that ESC is a highly effective tool for reducing crashes, deaths and injuries on our roads."

Electronic stability control works through a computer that detects the difference between where a car is heading and sensor readings of where the driver is intending to go, and then applies brakes to individual wheels to correct any deviations.

Land Transport spokesman Andy Knackstedt described it as an extension of anti-lock braking and traction-control systems. He believed it was particularly useful in preventing a driver from allowing a vehicle to leave the road, such as by falling asleep at the wheel, and then "over-correcting".

Automobile Association technical director Stella Stocks said the findings highlighted the value of Hyundai's intention to provide electronic stability control systems in all its new cars, at no extra cost to customers.

"The AA encourages all other mainstream car manufacturers to make ESC a compulsory safety feature within two years."