

Average US vehicle age hits record 11.5 years

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In the age of Apple's CarPlay, a lot of cars on the road still have tape decks.

The average vehicle in the U.S. is now a record 11.5 years old, according to consulting firm IHS Automotive, a sign of the increased reliability of today's vehicles and the lingering impact of the sharp drop in new car sales during the recession.

Drivers behind the wheel of older cars aren't enjoying some of the latest advanced safety features or infotainment systems that effectively turn cars into cellphones on wheels. Then again, they don't have to worry about hackers finding their way in to the car's computer network through the cassette or CD player.

IHS said U.S. registrations grew to a record 257.9 million cars and trucks, up 2 percent from a year earlier.

The average age of vehicles has been climbing steadily since IHS began tracking the number in 2002. As quality and reliability have improved, people have been holding on to their cars and trucks for longer. The average length of ownership for a new vehicle is now almost 6.5 years, IHS said. For a used vehicle, it's five years.

Cars and trucks now have the same average age, says Mark Seng, IHS Automotive's global aftermarket practice leader. For many years, cars had shorter lifespans than trucks, but their quality has now caught up.

Experts say there's no rule for how long to hold on to an old car or truck. A car with good reliability can go for 200,000 miles or more, which can easily last a decade for some motorists, says Doug Love, a spokesman for Consumer Reports.

The magazine doesn't recommend driving older cars without two key safety features introduced more than a decade ago: electronic stability control and side curtain air bags.

The aging car population could mean that Americans will be slow to adapt safety and semi-autonomous features that have car company executives and experts heralding a new age of the automobile. Adaptive cruise control arrived in the U.S. market in 2006, for example, but nine years later only 6 percent of all cars have it, according to a recent report from Boston Consulting Group. It will also take longer for much-hyped advances like CarPlay—which gives drivers access to their apps through the dashboard—to become commonplace.

But Seng says the auto industry should take heart. Even though the average vehicle age shows no sign of reversing, it is starting to plateau, since buyers have returned to the car market in big numbers. Sales of new cars rose from 12.7 million in 2011 to 16.5 million last year and are expected to reach or exceed 17 million this year. IHS thinks the average vehicle age will hit 11.6 years in 2016 but won't climb to 11.7 years until 2018.

Seng says that's a more normal rate than the industry saw in the years after the recession. Vehicle age increased rapidly between 2008 and 2013, since more people were keeping older cars. In 2008, the average age of cars and trucks in the U.S. was 10 years; by 2013, it was 11.4 years, or 14 percent higher.

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