

# Feds find Fiat Chrysler gear shifters can confuse drivers (Update)

February 8 2016, by Tom Krisher

---

Electronic gear shifters on some newer Fiat Chrysler SUVs and cars are so confusing that drivers have exited the vehicles with the engines running and while they are still in gear, causing crashes and some serious injuries, U.S. safety investigators have determined.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in documents posted during the weekend, has doubled the number of vehicles involved in an investigation of the problem, but it stopped short of seeking a recall. The agency found more than 100 crashes and over a dozen injuries, mostly in Jeep Grand Cherokees.

Agency tests found that operating the center console shift lever "is not intuitive and provides poor tactile and visual feedback to the driver, increasing the potential for unintended gear selection," investigators wrote in the documents. They upgraded the probe to an engineering analysis, which is a step closer to a recall. NHTSA will continue to gather information and seek a recall if necessary, spokesman Gordon Trowbridge said.

The investigation could determine just how much automakers will be able to change the way cars operate when they introduce new technology, and how far they can stray from conventional ways of controlling vehicles that drivers are accustomed to.

The probe now covers more than 856,000 vehicles including the popular Jeep Grand Cherokee SUV from the 2014 and 2015 model years and the

2012 through 2014 Dodge Charger and Chrysler 300 sedans with 3.6-liter V6 engines.

In the vehicles, drivers pull the shift lever forward or backward to select gears and the shifter doesn't move along a track like it does in most cars.

The cars and SUVs sound a chime and issue a dashboard warning message if the driver's door is opened while the vehicles are not in Park. But the gearshift does not have notches that match up with the gear you want to shift into and moves back to a centered position after the driver picks a gear. Investigators found that the push-button start-stop feature doesn't let the engine shut off if the vehicles aren't in Park, increasing the risk of the vehicles rolling away after drivers have exited.

"This function does not protect drivers who intentionally leave the engine running or drivers who do not recognize that the engine continues to run after an attempted shut-off," investigators wrote.

Cars rolling off unintentionally can injure the driver or pedestrians in the path of the vehicles, the agency said. Thus far, the investigation has found 314 complaints, 121 crashes and 30 injuries. Three drivers reported fractured pelvic bones, while four others needed to be hospitalized with a ruptured bladder, fractured kneecap, broken ribs, and severe leg trauma, according to the documents.

Fiat Chrysler says it is cooperating in the probe. The company changed the shifters so they function more like people are used to in the 2016 Grand Cherokee and 2015 Chargers and 300 sedans, but FCA said it did so to increase customer satisfaction and not because of safety concerns.

When the investigation began in August, it covered only 408,000 Grand Cherokees from 2014 and 2015. At first investigators began looking at whether the shifters were malfunctioning and failing to go into Park on

the drivers' commands. But in later documents, the safety agency seems to be focused on the way the shifters operate.

One driver, in Atkinson, New Hampshire, complained that in November of last year that her 2014 Grand Cherokee began traveling in reverse with no driver inside. The SUV crossed a street, crashed into a mailbox and rolled up a driveway. The driver wrote that she tried to get back into the Jeep but was knocked to the ground and it rolled over her legs and injured her. The Jeep eventually stopped after hitting a fence. Drivers are not identified in the NHTSA complaint database.

"The shift knob is a real problem," wrote another driver from Enumclaw, Washington, who reported two unintentional roll-away incidents in a 2015 Grand Cherokee. "I am not a complainer, however this is a major safety issue. It terrifies me to drive this vehicle."

© 2016 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Feds find Fiat Chrysler gear shifters can confuse drivers (Update) (2016, February 8) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-02-feds-fiat-chrysler-gear-shifters.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.