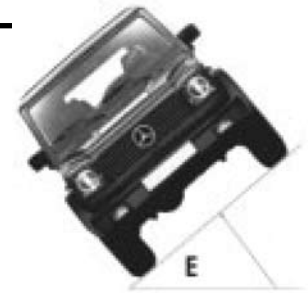


Four-wheel drives & safety



One of the great road safety myths is that four-wheel drives are safer. It's simply not true.

Four-wheel drives tend to come out well in head-on collisions. However, in many other types of accidents, many popular four-wheel drive vehicles have higher rates of death or injury.

The American government does extensive research into road deaths and the vehicles involved in road deaths. They recently published a list of the thirteen safest vehicles and the fourteen most unsafe vehicles.

Of the list of thirteen safest vehicles, four were medium-sized four-wheel drives. Of the fourteen *most unsafe* vehicles, eight were four-wheel drives or large pickup trucks – the vehicles that you'd wrongly assume would be winners in road accidents.

The reason yuppie four-wheel drives seem more safe is because they tend to be large and heavy. Simple maths says that you'll splatter most smaller cars in an accident. This feeling of invincibility makes yuppie four-wheel drives very attractive to bullies and people who need to feel strong and powerful. Thus their yuppie four-wheel drive becomes their own private castle and they often drive as if they own the road.

Four-wheel drive owners tend to forget that their castle-on-wheels does not corner as well as an ordinary family car. Further, because they are so high off the ground they tend to

roll over if they have to make a very sudden turn. There is also anecdotal evidence that because four-wheel drive owners tend to feel more safe, they do not wear their seatbelts.

American studies have shown that yuppie four-wheel drives are most at risk in rollover crashes, which kill one in every four people in American car accidents. The study, a mathematical analysis of 189 year-2000 vehicles conducted for *USA Today*, concluded that some models turn over in nearly half of all incidents. The paper found that the first-generation Toyota RAV4 and the Suzuki Vitara (also sold as the Chevrolet/Geo Tracker) were likely to roll over in an accident 38 to 43.9% of the time. For most cars, the chance of a rollover in an accident is less than 10 percent.

Yuppie four-wheel drive owners rely heavily on their solidity & weight to make them winners in a head-on collision, but this same bulk can easily kill them.

As we said earlier, if a big four-wheel drive hits a smaller car, then the smaller car is history. Most people understand this. However, many accidents don't involve a four-wheel drive hitting a smaller vehicle.

Crashtests in Australia have demonstrated beyond all reasonable doubt that when an older four-wheel drive has a head-on collision with something solid, the occupants of the four-wheel drive are in big trouble. This is because few four-wheel drives are designed to crumple properly in an accident.

Have you ever wondered how a stuntman can leap off a building and not get killed? It's simple. He doesn't hit the pavement below; instead he falls onto a large pile of cardboard grocery boxes. These boxes collapse as he hits, absorbing the energy of his fall. Often he will simply walk away totally unscathed. That's how the crumple zones on a car work. The zone collapses like the stuntman's cardboard boxes, absorbing much of the force from an accident and protecting the car's occupants.

If an older four-wheel drive hits a lamppost, bank, bridge or truck, then the four-wheel drive does not crumple much. Therefore the people inside absorb the full force of the accident. It's as simple as that.

Four-wheel drives are equally unsafe off the road. Offroad vehicles are marketed as a macho toy, and the results can be catastrophic. It's bad enough with an experienced offroad driver, but put a city driver behind the wheel of a powerful offroad vehicle and you have the perfect setup for a serious accident.

As any farmer will tell you, gravel or mud are totally different to asphalt when it comes to driving. You have to know what you're doing and take extreme care.

The idea that four-wheel drives never let you slip is nonsense, and on steep banks you can easily roll over and seriously damage yourself. At this point, cellphone or not, you may discover just how far from help you are •

