

Chevy Spark Outperforms Competitors To Earn IIHS's Top Safety Pick Award

Only one minicar out of 11 tested achieves an acceptable rating in the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety's small overlap front crash test, making these tiny vehicles the worst performing group of any evaluated so far, according to the IIHS.

The Chevrolet Spark's acceptable rating in the test, along with good ratings in the Institute's four other crashworthiness evaluations, earns the new minicar a 2014 Top Safety Pick award, said Russ Rader, senior vice president of Communications for IIHS. The Spark was among the initial award winners announced in December. The new small overlap test results for the rest of the minicar group mean that no other models in this size category join the Spark in the winner's circle yet.

The Chevrolet Spark is the only minicar tested to earn an acceptable rating in the small overlap front test, Rader said. Introduced in 2012, the small overlap test replicates what happens when the front corner of a vehicle collides with another vehicle or an object such as a tree or utility pole. In the test, 25 percent of a vehicle's front end on the driver's side strikes a rigid barrier at 40 mph.

The test is more difficult than the head-on crashes conducted by the government or the longstanding IIHS moderate overlap test because most of the vehicle's front-end crush zone is bypassed, Rader said. That makes it hard for the vehicle to manage crash energy, and the occupant compartment can collapse as a result. Nevertheless, in many size categories, manufacturers have found ways to improve vehicle structures to meet this challenge.

"Small, lightweight vehicles have an inherent safety disadvantage. That's why it's even more important to choose one with the best occupant protection," says Joe Nolan, IIHS senior vice president for vehicle research. "Unfortunately, as a group, minicars aren't performing as well as other vehicle categories in the small overlap crash."

In contrast to the minicar group's performance, most models in the small car category, which are a little larger, have done much better in the test, Rader said. There are five good ratings and five acceptable ratings among 17 small cars that have been evaluated so far.

Looking at the component ratings that make up the overall marks, every minicar, including the Spark, rates marginal or poor for structure, the most fundamental element of occupant protection, Rader said. When a vehicle's structure doesn't hold up, injury risk is high. Collapsing structures can knock frontal airbags and seats out of position,

exacerbating the problem.

All the vehicles except the Spark and the Mazda 2 also earn low ratings for restraints and kinematics, Rader said. Seven of the 11 were downgraded for allowing too much occupant forward motion during the crash. In these cases, either the safety belt didn't do a good enough job holding the dummy in place, or the dummy's head missed or slid off the frontal airbag.

The side curtain airbag, which has an important role to play in small overlap frontal crashes, provided insufficient forward coverage in eight of the minicars and didn't deploy at all in the Toyota Yaris.

In many models, the steering column moved sideways, and in



2014 Chevrolet Spark

three cars the seat tipped.

Despite its marginal structure, the Spark achieves an acceptable overall rating because the dummy's movement was fairly well controlled and its injury measures were low, Rader said.

The Spark is the only vehicle with good injury measures for all

body regions, including the lower leg and foot, generally a problematic area in the small overlap test.

This may be related to the fact that the structure around the lower part of the occupant compartment held up better than other minicars.

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