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## NHTSA explains Sevierville woman's sudden acceleration in Lexus

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SEVIERVILLE (WATE) -- In May, 6 On Your Side **first reported** that a federal safety group was investigating why a Sevierville woman couldn't stop her new car when it began accelerating on Interstate 40. Now, there are new details.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) is explaining what may have caused the unwanted acceleration.

(To do an online search of NHTSA reports, [click here](#) and put in the vehicle's year, make and model. Then you can select "vehicle speed control" to see the complaints.)

In its report, NHTSA suggests what may have lead to the unexpected sudden acceleration of 14 **2007 Lexus ES350s** it began investigating early this spring. One of the cars belonged to Rhonda Smith, of Sevierville.

In a letter sent in August to ██████ the Lexus division cautions that the all weather winter floor mat should not be put on top of the carpeted floor mat in the driver's seat position of the ES350.

█████ bought that model in 2006. "I think it's sad that these mats were installed like they were."

The floor mats in ██████ car, as she showed 6 On Your Side previously, were one of several concerns that came up in the investigation by the NHTSA.

On October 12, 2006, ██████ drove her Lexus onto I-40 Westbound from the Sevierville on ramp and started to merge. "I had sped up to about 65 miles an hour."

Then ██████ said something strange happened. The car began accelerating on its own. "I looked down at my speedometer. It had gotten up to about 70 and I didn't have my foot on the accelerator."

"At about 75, the cruise light came on by itself. So I thought, maybe that's why it started to speed up. So, I took my hand and disengaged the cruise," ██████ said.

But she said the car kept on going faster. "And then I geared down into neutral and it did nothing. So I kept doing that. Then I just put it in reverse."

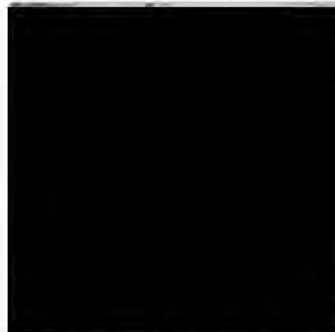
█████ said she also applied the brakes. "Then, of course, I pushed the emergency brake on. I guess I said out loud, I can't believe this is happening."

Eventually, the car stopped after traveling about six miles. The NHTSA investigation focused on the unsecured, all weather floor mat.

This past spring, ██████ told 6 On Your Side the dealer had put the winter mat on top of her carpeted floor mat. But it could have slid accidentally onto the pedal since it wasn't secured by a plastic hook.

Investigators asked whether she had pushed the engine control button. ██████ car does not have an ignition key.

To the best of her recollection, ██████ did not press the button as long as required to stop the engine.



"I think it's sad that these mats were installed like they were," ██████ says, reading the report from NHTSA.



Toyota is warning customers never to drive with the all weather floor mat (seen here) on top of the carpeted floor mat.

NHTSA engineers also checked the brakes on her car. [REDACTED] said she applied the brakes but the car didn't stop. Yet, it had only 2,700 miles on the odometer.

[REDACTED] says she's read details of the preliminary investigation. The report says sometimes, repeated applications of the brake pedal reduced acceleration but did not stop the vehicle.

It appears the drivers were unaware that the engine control button's function changes. When the vehicle is in motion, it must be depressed for three seconds.

The report also says, "An unsecured Lexus all weather floor mat can trap the throttle pedal in an open position, resulting in significant unwanted acceleration."

This past spring when 6 On Your Side looked closely at the winter floor mat, there was a warning. But it's hard to read. In tiny print it says, "do not place on top of existing floor mats."

Toyota mailed [REDACTED] a sticker to be placed on the winter floor mat. It warns to never use more than one mat at a time in the driver's seat position.

The government's preliminary evaluation of the Lexus ES350 is finished. However, there have been additional consumer complaints like [REDACTED] to NHTSA.

NHTSA has decided to upgrade its probe to what's called an engineering analysis. That means it will test some Lexus ES350s itself to determine whether there's a safety issue involved.

NHTSA says Toyota Motor Company believes the all weather mat is not a safety related defect. Unsecured mats were found in the majority of the vehicles investigated.

Lexus tells 6 On Your Side it's cooperating fully with NHTSA as it investigates the various allegations in the report.



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