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Owner says this car's floor mats nearly killed her daughter

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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
Friday, Jun. 08 2007

Lexus, famous for its safety features, boasts that its top luxury sedan (the $61,000 LS 460) can park itself in parallel almost automatically.

[redacted] wants to know why a company that can do all that didn't pay more attention to its floor mats.

She says her floor mat caused her Lexus to accelerate at ever higher speeds as the driver desperately tried to stop it.

[redacted] isn't alone. Government safety officials have opened an investigation into the floor mats on the Lexus ES 350. Some 20 owners have filed complaints that their 350s suddenly accelerated.

[redacted] manages her husband [redacted] podiatry practice in Centralia. Here's her story:

On May 18, the couple's daughter, [redacted] and five girlfriends set out for the Galleria mall in Richmond Heights to celebrate [redacted] 17th birthday.

[redacted] insisted that they take her Lexus for the 60-mile drive. "It'll be safer for you," [redacted] told them.

She had researched her car purchase for four months and test driven nine cars. The tungsten silver Lexus she selected came with seven air bags and a sterling reputation for safety.

The [redacted] don't allow their daughter to drive in the big city yet, so her friend [redacted] was behind the wheel. About 7 miles out of Centralia, approaching the small town of Hoffman, [redacted] noticed the cruise control light come on even though the cruise was off. She tried unsuccessfully to turn it off.

She tapped the brakes but the car accelerated. The more she braked, the more it accelerated, [redacted] recounted.

[redacted] tried to shift the car into neutral but the car was still accelerating.

She tried to turn off the car but it wouldn't stop. [redacted] stood on the brake with both feet. The car kept going.

"I am sure you can imagine how terrified the kids were at this point — can you imagine traveling in a car for over 5 miles, going over 90 miles per hour and no brakes?" [redacted] wrote in her government safety complaint.

By now the girls were desperate. [redacted] the front seat passenger, threw the car into park just as they approached a four-way stop.

The car shuddered, made loud noises, smoked and skidded about 150 feet before stopping.

When she heard what happened, [redacted] called the auto dealership; the salesman asked how many floor mats were on the driver's side.

Two, [redacted] replied; the standard carpeted mat and the optional rubber, all-weather mat.

The salesman said Lexus had just notified the dealership of a problem with its floor mats.

"I immediately went to look at the floorboard and the mat was jammed under the brake, over the accelerator," [redacted] wrote. "Every time [redacted] attempted to brake, she was accelerating without her knowledge."

On April 5, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration notified Toyota's Lexus division that the safety agency was receiving complaints of "unwanted acceleration" from owners of 2007 model Lexus ES 350s.

"In each incident the pedal was apparently trapped by the floor mat after the driver pressed the accelerator pedal," the complaint says. "A field investigation" by government investigators "confirmed that the all-weather mat can trap the accelerator pedal in such a position."

Lexus spokesman Greg Thome says he can't comment on the complaints while the government and Lexus investigate.

In April and May, Thome said, Lexus sent letters to owners of the ES 350 warning that placing the optional all-weather mat on top of the standard carpet mat may cause "slipping forward and interfering with the movement of the accelerator pedal."

The car is designed for just one floor mat, Lexus wrote, adding "we apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused you."

John Capps, president and CEO of Plaza Motor Co. in Creve Coeur, says he has interceded vigorously with Lexus on behalf of the [redacted]. They have purchased 11 cars from the dealership.

Capps says the Lexus sustained about $10,000 in damage, including its transmission.

[redacted] says she no longer trusts the car to drive. She can't sell it without disclosing the problem, she says, and who would buy it? She's asking Lexus to exchange it.

Meanwhile, the $40,800 car sits on the dealer's lot.

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