

Sudden braking in 2 VW SUV models draws regulatory scrutiny

March 15 2022, by Tom Krisher



Kendall Heiman stands with the loner car she has driven for the past two months, Wednesday, March 9, 2022, in Lawrence, Kan., while a dealership works to repair her Volkswagen 2021 Atlas Cross Sport after the car slammed on the brakes for no reason on Jan. 5. Heiman and a dozen other Cross Sport owners have filed complaints about the issues with the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Credit: AP Photo/Charlie Riedel

First came the beeping alarms and the dashboard lights warning that something had gone haywire. Then the driver's side windows suddenly and mysteriously rolled down. Kendall Heiman's Volkswagen SUV then pulled the scariest stunt of all: It abruptly braked for no reason.

Heiman, a clinical social worker in Lawrence, Kansas, was driving her 15-year-old son to a class on Jan. 5 when her 2021 Atlas Cross Sport went bonkers. The malfunctions turned a normally routine two-mile round trip into a white-knuckle ordeal.

"It literally feels like the car is possessed," Heiman said. "I'm not feeling like I'm driving my car. My car is driving me."

Heiman's experience, it turns out, wasn't unique. Since late 2020, 47 VW owners have complained to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration about the same glitches in their 2020 and 2021 VW Atlas and Atlas Cross Sport SUVs. Some drivers reported that they narrowly escaped collisions, though a review of the complaints found no reports of crashes.

In a statement, NHTSA said it has been gathering information from VW about the problem and is monitoring complaints and other data sources. The agency hasn't opened a formal investigation. And it would have to collect and analyze additional data before it could seek a recall.

Complaints about unexpected braking involving the VW SUVs began in September of 2020, eight months before Heiman bought her SUV, NHTSA's records show.

In a statement, Volkswagen said it is working on the problem but stopped short of saying it's recalling the affected vehicles.

"VW is aware of concerns involving faulty door wiring harnesses in

certain Atlas and Atlas Cross Sport vehicles," the company said. "We are working closely with NHTSA regarding the next steps towards identifying the affected vehicles."

After her SUV's unexpected braking on Jan. 5, Heiman initially kept driving, figuring that the problem was a "bizarre fluke." The SUV and a VW app flashed malfunction alerts, she said, but neither displayed a message to stop driving the [vehicle](#).

Her Cross Sport braked unexpectedly a few more times that day, but she was able to override it with the gas pedal. Heading into a roundabout on the way home with her son the same day, the SUV abruptly braked and came to a complete stop, Heiman said, and another SUV narrowly missed rear-ending her. She shut the engine off and restarted it to override what she thinks was a malfunction of automatic emergency braking.

Jan. 5 was the first time she had encountered the problem with the Cross Sport, which she bought new in May 2021.

Once home, Heiman called her dealer's service department and got an appointment the next day. On the way there, she said, the SUV braked mysteriously again while exiting a two-lane highway.

"They didn't tell me it wasn't safe to drive to the dealer," she said.

In the shop, a mechanic detected a problem with a wiring harness in the driver's door, but she was told there weren't any parts to fix it. (Electrical shorts in wiring harnesses can cause multiple problems in vehicles, including brake activation.)

After discussing the safety risks with her, the dealership arranged for a rental car, Heiman said, and eventually the use of a new all-wheel-drive

VW SUV.



This image provided by Kendall Heiman shows the dashboard of Kendall Heiman's Volkswagen SUV. First came the beeping alarms and the dashboard lights warning that something had gone haywire. Then the driver's side windows suddenly and mysteriously rolled down. Heiman's Volkswagen SUV then pulled the scariest stunt of all: It abruptly braked for no reason. Credit: Kendall Heiman via AP

The same day, Heiman reported the problem to VW in an online chat

and was referred to a regional manager who was of little help, she said.

VW declined to comment on Heiman's assertions.

On Jan. 12, Heiman complained to NHTSA but said she never heard back from the agency. (NHTSA says it reviews all complaints but in most cases doesn't respond directly to them.)

For more than two months, Heiman said, her burnt orange Cross Sport, which had 12,600 miles on it and had cost \$45,000, sat at the dealership waiting for the part. But late last week, after a reporter contacted the dealership, Heiman received a call telling her that the part had come in and that her vehicle had been repaired.

Others who filed complaints with NHTSA wrote that dealers told them they were out of loaner cars and that they should keep driving their vehicles.

"They also could not guarantee that my parking brake would not engage again while the car was in drive, but did not want to offer me a rental car because Volkswagen doesn't consider it a ['safety issue,'](#) " one unidentified owner from Sidney Center, New York, wrote in a complaint.

Heiman's experience with Volkswagen made her worry about others who have encountered the same problems with the same VW models. She wonders why the automaker and government safety regulators haven't recalled them.

If there is a recall, it's not clear how many vehicles would have to be repaired. In 2020 and 2021, VW sold 203,000 of both models combined.

Many owners wrote in complaints that the automatic emergency braking

system had abruptly stopped their Atlas and Atlas Cross Sport SUVs for no reason. Safety advocates say the new technology, which uses cameras and computers to detect obstacles and stop or slow down if a driver doesn't react, shows great promise to prevent crashes.

But the technology is also causing concerns for automakers. NHTSA recently opened investigations into unexpected braking by the systems in some Honda and Tesla vehicles. It has been investigating Nissan Rogue small SUVs since 2019.

In documents about the Honda investigation, NHTSA said that six people complained of crashes with minor injuries.

"Inadvertent or unexpected braking activation while driving can cause unexpected speed reductions that can lead to increased vulnerability to rear end impact collisions," the agency wrote.

Investigations often lead to recalls. But they can take months or even years to complete.

NHTSA is working on developing rules that will require automatic emergency braking system on all new light vehicles and heavy trucks. In addition, automakers have agreed to make the system standard on most of their models by September of this year.

"We all want to have technology," said Michael Brooks, chief counsel for the nonprofit Center for Auto Safety. "But if it doesn't work and it actually causes other safety issues like phantom braking, then it suggests they need a bit of a performance standard for all of these AEB systems."

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