

Drivers say automated car systems prevented crashes



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CONSUMER WATCH

A few months ago, I wrote in this column about how pedestrian deaths are becoming increasingly common on our roadways, with some of the alarming increases blamed on our being distracted by the ever-present devices we have with us constantly. While reading through on the findings of a study of the phenomenon, one statement in particular caught my eye: The number of pedestrian deaths might be higher still, if not for the installation of automated collision-avoidance systems now on many vehicles.

Our cars and trucks are steadily becoming self-

thinking robots. Today's cars can automatically apply the brakes if the vehicle in front of you suddenly slows or stops; sound an alarm if you're nodding off at the wheel; alert you if you're about to hit a vehicle in your blind spot; keep you from backing into an object, animal or person behind you; enable your vehicle to parallel-park itself and many others.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, of the 35,092 people who died in vehicle crashes on American roads in 2015, the vast majority (94 percent) were at least partially caused by human error or poor decisions.

All these technologies are paving the way toward a future in which the vehicles will be doing much — if not all — of the driving. Depending on your point of view, that could be comforting or alarming. It's an established fact that humans are just not very good at making decisions all the time, and we can suffer from fatigue, distraction, poor judgment and lack of impulse

control. On the other hand, we know computerized systems are subject to security flaws, equipment failure and poor programming.

But in labs and research facilities around the world, engineers are working towards a more automated future, and are watching as these features are tested on a massive scale on today's roads. The results, Consumer Reports noted recently, can be found in saved lives and happier drivers. Consumer Reports asked its subscribers to report on their experiences with some of these technologies and found most of them reported they were not only satisfied with these systems but also, in some cases, credited those systems with avoiding crashes.

More than 57,000 vehicle owners responded to the magazine's request to provide information, reporting that their vehicles included such features as auto-

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