

Wheels

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Toyota's Reaction to Transmission Woes Draws Customers' Ire

By [Christopher Jensen](#)

Although consumer satisfaction studies have often given Toyota's RAV4 "cute ute" high marks for quality, some owners are furious at the automaker because it failed to warn them of a serious transmission problem. Had Toyota warned them, they say, they could have avoided expensive repairs.

Benjamin Birkbeck of Yarmouth, Me., who owns a 2002 RAV4, is one of those consumers. His wife, Rhonda, was trying to merge into traffic when a suddenly faulty transmission meant she was "almost run over by a semi-truck," he wrote in a complaint on the [Center for Auto Safety Web site](#). "This is a safety issue. My wife was almost killed."

Dianna Radford of Albuquerque, N.M., had to pay about \$4,000 for a repair on her 2002 model. "I have owned Toyotas for 12 years and I will never buy another one, the way I was treated," she said.

They are not alone. The [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) has more than 120 complaints about transmission problems with the 2001–2003 RAV4, of which Toyota sold about 250,000. Often the blame is put on the engine control module (ECM), which tells the transmission what to do.

In March 2006 Toyota sent dealers a technical service bulletin warning them that some consumers might complain about harsh shifting. It said improvements were made to the computer "manufacturing process to reduce the possibility of this condition occurring." It then told the dealers to replace the module and if that did not work to replace the transmission. But consumers owning the vehicles were never notified about the problem.

That kind of a warning is important because, as soon as the transmission begins to misbehave, consumers should stop driving it and get it fixed to avoid major transmission

damage, said Lance Wiggins, the technical director of the Automatic Transmission Rebuilders Association. Mr. Wiggins said the association is quite familiar with the RAV4 problem.

Overall Toyota has “a fairly responsible customer satisfaction program,” said Clarence Ditlow, the executive director of the Center for Auto Safety. But this time consumers are getting a bad deal.

“At best you can say it slipped through the cracks,” said Mr. Ditlow. “At worst you can say that Toyota is knowingly imposing the risk of a very large repair on consumers.”

Brian Lyons, a spokesman for Toyota, said that when the bulletin was sent out the automaker didn’t notify consumers because it was not considered a safety problem; additionally, repairs were being covered by a warranty, he said, and Toyota did not realize that the ECM problem might result in damaged transmissions.

Although it is now clear that the ECM problem can damage transmissions, Mr. Lyons said the automaker still isn’t ready to send out notices to consumers because it is still studying the issue and whether to extend the warranty. He said consumers with problems should call Toyota’s customer assistance center at (800) 331-4331.

Mr. Ditlow interprets the March 2006 service bulletin as an admission of a defect, something Mr. Lyons did not dispute. But despite the defect Toyota did not offer any special warranty coverage. Instead the bulletin said repairs would be covered under the federal emissions warranty of 80,000 miles or eight years from the time the vehicle was sold.

The bulletin also told dealers they could only make repairs under that warranty based on consumer complaints once a problem had been identified — not to prevent the problem.

Many owners have turned to N.H.T.S.A., the federal safety agency, saying they feel their vehicles are not safe and asking for help in the form of a recall. But the agency has not undertaken a defect investigation, which could lead to a recall.

Mr. Ditlow, who has watched the safety agency and the auto industry for three decades, says he has concluded that N.H.T.S.A. is reluctant to open investigations into transmission problems unless they involve vehicles that stall or have problems on the highway, which constitutes a clear safety problem.

Rae Tyson, a spokesman for N.H.T.S.A., said the problem has been deciding whether the complaints are a safety issue or just consumer inconvenience. “They are watching it very closely,” he said.

Rhonda Birkbeck says if a N.H.T.S.A. official had the same experience she had there wouldn’t be any doubt it was a safety defect. “I just hope they won’t still be studying it when someone loses their life,” she said.

