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Out of the skids; ESC adds safety

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Former F1 champion Michael Schumacher is a keen supporter of Choose ESC.

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By Paul Hudson

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CNN -- That electronic safety systems on autos save lives isn't in doubt -- whether they should be fitted as standard to all new cars is the heated question throughout Europe.

Electronic Stability Control (ESC), sometimes referred to as Electronic Stability Program (ESP), was developed and launched by Bosch in 1995 and this active safety system has often been described as the most significant addition to driving safety since the introduction of the seat belt.

Stability control evolved from other technologies such as traction control and anti-lock brakes. The sensors for these systems, along with some additional sensors, feed information to a computerised control unit.

The signals are continuously monitored and if a deviation from the intended course is detected, in a fraction of a second the control unit applies a small amount of braking to whichever wheel is needed to help stabilise the course of the vehicle.

Some systems also adjust the power output of the engine to further help stabilise the vehicle. This is all done by the control unit which reacts faster than a human can -- indeed, the driver may not be aware that the system has intervened.

Whether the skid is the result of an emergency avoidance manoeuvre or a simple error of judgement, ESC can help a driver maintain control.

Yet the results of a survey by safety organisation Euro NCAP on the relatively low fitment of ESC to cars throughout the EU has led to calls for it to be fitted as standard. At present, only 42 per cent of all newly registered cars in the EU are equipped with ESC.

The EU-wide survey places the UK, Netherlands, Greece, Malta and Ireland bottom according to the percentage of cars fitted with ESC, especially among superminis and small family cars.

And the reasons for the disparity are not technical -- some models have ESC fitted as standard equipment in one country, yet it is not available, even as an option, in others. Denmark, Sweden and Germany topped the list.

Many international studies demonstrate that skidding is the root cause of at least 40 per cent of all fatal traffic accidents. According to these studies, ESC can reduce the risk of skidding by as much as 80 per cent.

A new study of the social costs of traffic accidents from the University of Cologne, presented at the campaign launch, concludes that if ESC were introduced on all new vehicles, 4,000 lives could be saved and 100,000 injuries prevented in Europe alone.

The Cologne study also confirms that the costs of such a universal introduction of ESC would be significantly lower than the current level of costs arising as a consequence of accidents that could be prevented by the standard fitment of such systems.

Despite that, manufacturers are wary about being forced to add extra equipment without increasing the price of a given model.

A study conducted by the European Commission shows that drivers' awareness of ESC is non-existent or poor, and that most drivers do not consider choosing it as an option.

Once the benefits have been explained to them, however, 80 per cent would opt for ESC in their next car, said EU Commissioner Viviane Reding, speaking at the "Choose ESC" launch event.

Michael Schumacher is one of the campaign's prominent supporters. The seven times Formula One World Champion said: "You never know when a crash might happen so don't take chances with the lives of you or your family. Choose ESC."

In presenting the Euro NCAP results of ESC fitment across Europe, its secretary general Adrian Hobbs said: "We must all do what we can to raise awareness of ESC's importance. Car manufacturers respond to the demands of customers but customers will only demand ESC when they become aware of the benefits."

The RAC Foundation in the UK says that ESC should feature high on the shopping list of priorities when choosing a new car. Its executive director, Edmund King, said: "The safest car on the road is the one which does not get involved in accidents."

King went on: "Driving carefully and attentively is perhaps the best way to reduce the chances of being in a crash but technology can play an important role, too. That is why ESC should be standard on more cars in the UK and Ireland."

"It seems odd that more cars sold in parts of Eastern Europe have these safety features fitted as standard than cars in the UK. We are particularly concerned that ESC is not available in over half of all superminis bought in the UK. These smaller cars tend to be bought by the more vulnerable younger drivers who arguably need this protection most."

RoadSafe, a road safety partnership of leading companies in the motor and transport industries in the UK, also welcomed the "Choose ESC" campaign as a positive contribution to reducing the toll of vehicle deaths and serious injuries across the Europe.

"Stability control braking is as important as the introduction of the compulsory wearing of seat belts some 20 years ago," said RoadSafe director Adrian Walsh.

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"If all vehicles across Europe were to be fitted as standard equipment with stability control we could reduce skidding accidents by 80 per cent. Of course vehicle technology is only part of the answer, we must also focus on driving ability, road design and management, in fact a total holistic approach to road safety.

"However, having experienced ESC in a controlled test, I am confident that standard fitment of this technology would contribute massively to making driving safer."

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