

How to prevent and stop a runaway vehicle

Recent news reports of vehicles accelerating out of control may have you wondering about your own vehicle's likelihood of this occurring, and if it does, the safest way to react. Following are some important considerations.

Your floor mat

Be sure your floor mat is properly aligned. "In most cases, floor mats are held in place by hooks or fasteners of some kind. But often the mats are not reattached properly after a tip to the car wash or when the owner removes them during cleaning," wrote Phillip Reed, senior consumer advice editor, and Dan Edmunds, director of vehicle testing at Edmunds.com, in their article "How to Stop a Runaway Vehicle" (article 159766 posted on www.Edmunds.com).

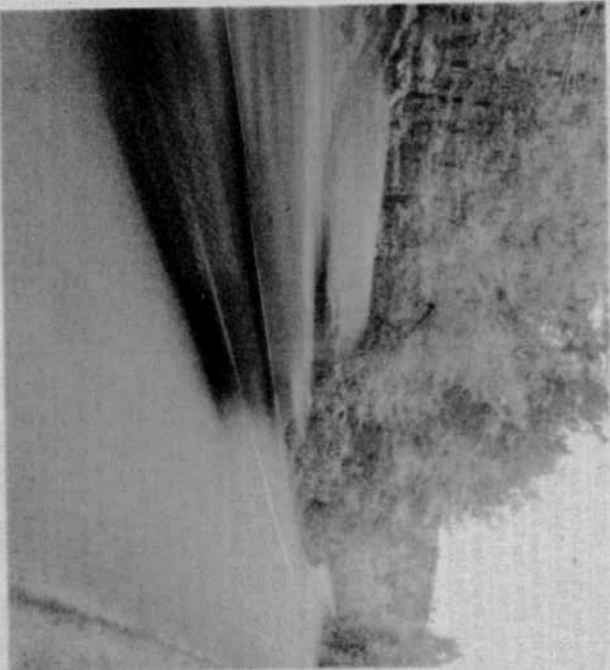
Additionally, as you enter and exit your car, the floor mat can move around just enough so the front right corner can end up holding down a top-hinged accelerator pedal. This is especially so with heavier winter floor mats.

Reed and Edmunds pointed to an informal survey of Edmunds.com's long-term test fleet that revealed three of 12 vehicles had floor mats that weren't properly attached. Translation: This can happen to anyone. Following are five tips from Reed and Edmunds for checking and aligning floor mats.

1. Regularly check to ensure your floor mat is properly positioned and secured by hooks or fasteners. Recheck the position of the floor mat after each time you get the car washed or serviced.

2. Don't stack heavy winter mats on top of carpet mats. Instead, remove the carpeted mats and attach the winter ones to the retaining hooks or clips.

3. Select only those aftermarket floor mats that connect to the retaining clips in your vehicle. "Always use floor mats that are cut specifically for your make and model of car," noted Reed and Edmunds. Selecting mats merely because they have rubberized treads on the bottom is not a good idea because the treads can wear down in time and become ineffective.



4. With your hand, test the throttle pedal clearance. You want to be sure the mat stays clear of the bottom edge of the pedal as it moves all the way to the floor. "This is particularly important in cars that have top-hinged pedals," they wrote.

5. Remember, you always can take the floor mats out.

How to stop safely

If you have one of the cars being recalled for sudden acceleration, and the dealer hasn't yet fixed your vehicle, following are some tips to study that can help you safely stop should your car get away from you.

Move the floor mat. If you can, pull the floor mat to dislodge it from the accelerator. Then pull over and stop the vehicle. "Insert your shoe behind the gas pedal, and pull it up from behind," noted

Reed and Edmunds. "This can release a throttle held down by a mat or a defective pedal return spring."

Shift into neutral. If adjusting the floor mat doesn't stop the acceleration, shift the vehicle into neutral (N) and brake the car to a stop. Beware that you will hear the engine rev loudly, but this doesn't mean the car is traveling faster, noted Reed and Edmunds. Rather, it signals that the engine is disengaged from the transmission. "It could also damage the engine, but this is a matter of personal safety, so it's unavoidable," they noted.

Turn the engine off. If you can't put the vehicle into neutral, turn the engine off or to ACC. Bear in mind, however, that without the engine running, you'll lose the vehicle's power assist, so it'll be much harder to turn the steering wheel, and apply the brakes, wrote Reed and Edmunds.

If the vehicle has a key ignition, turn the key to the ACC position and turn off the engine. But don't remove the key from the ignition, as this will lock the steering wheel and you won't be able to turn it.

If the vehicle has a start/stop button instead of a key ignition, check your owner's manual for the correct procedure to shut off the engine while the vehicle is in Drive. "Some carmakers require you to firmly and steadily push the button for at least three seconds to turn off the engine," wrote Reed and Edmunds. "Others require you to press the button three times in succession." Of course, this is best done before an emergency situation occurs. Make it a point to read this portion of your owner's manual today.

Hit the brake with both feet. If the above-noted steps aren't working, firmly and steadily step on the brake pedal with both feet. "Do not pump the brake pedal repeatedly, as this will increase the effort required to slow the vehicle," noted Reed and Edmunds.

The good news is that "cars have built-in preventive mechanisms, multiple throttle return springs and other features to prevent such a scenario," they continued. "Some cars even have shut-off mechanisms that can sense if the gas pedal is stuck."

Bottom line? Check that your floor mats are properly aligned, study your vehicle's manual on shutting off the car in an emergency situation, and practice the techniques noted above so they become second nature to you should an emergency occur.