

Analysis: Government issues new rule requiring automakers to install switches that make it harder for power windows to close inadvertently

MELISSA BLOCK, host: The government has announced a new rule to reduce the risk of power **windows** in vehicles closing on children. Automakers will have until 2008 to install switches that will make it harder to close these **windows** inadvertently. NPR's Kathleen Schlach reports.

KATHLEEN SCHLACH reporting:

Dr. Jeffrey Runge, head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, says too many children are being injured and killed by power **windows**.

Dr. JEFFREY RUNGE (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration): This happens most often when the key is left in the ignition and the child is in the **car**, the **car's** stopped, they're not in their safety belt or safety seat. If they kneel or stand on the switch and they are leaning out of the **window**, a vehicle can trap a child in there and actually suffocate them.

SCHLACH: The government only recently began collecting data on these types of accidents, so it's hard to know the extent of the problem, says Jeanette Fennell, founder of the safety advocacy group Kids 'N **Cars**.

Ms. JEANETTE FENNELL (Kids 'N **Cars**): No one knows how big the problem really is, but we know since 1990, at least 37 children have been killed by power **windows**, and most of these children are age three or younger.

SCHLACH: The government's solution is to outlaw toggle switches, the kind that rock back and forth and are easy to press by accident. Again, Jeffrey Runge.

Dr. RUNGE: What we have done is to create a rule that will mandate that the industry use only those power **window** switches that you have to put your finger underneath and lift up in order to close the **window** so children cannot inadvertently raise the **window** on themselves.

SCHLACH: Runge says the industry's been given so much lead time that the cost of switching the switches should be negligible, around 50 cents per **car**. Most Japanese vehicles sold in the US already have the newer switches. Just over half of General Motors vehicles and just over a quarter of DaimlerChrysler vehicles do, as well. Ford says 61 percent of its vehicles will have them by 2007.

The new switches won't prevent all power **window** accidents. Some occur when **windows** are raised by another person in the **car**, a sibling or even a parent. That's what happened when Rebecca Hergatt parked her **car**. She had her teen-age daughter in the front seat and her five-year-old son in the back. She rolled up the **windows**, gathered her things and got out.

Ms. REBECCA HERGATT: We had no idea my son had already stuck his head out the **window** and he had now been trapped and couldn't utter a sound. It hits right where their vocal cords are; they can't make noise. My daughter got out her side and then she saw that he was stuck and he was blue.

SCHLACH: Hergatt, a nurse, was able to resuscitate him.

Safety advocates want automakers to prevent these types of injuries, too, by installing **windows** that open automatically if they hit something. It's the same technology used in elevators and garage doors and in most **cars** in Europe. But NHTSA declined to issue a new rule on that because it would cost \$50 per **car** and would take much longer to put in place. Safety advocates also want the government and industry to do more to warn parents. Again, Jeanette Fennell of Kids 'N **Cars**.

Ms. FENNELL: We commissioned a Harris Poll, and it showed that 78 percent of parents had no idea that power **windows** have ever killed or injured children.

SCHLACH: Fennell says she's happy that automakers will be installing safer switches, but she and other safety advocates say the industry has known about the problem for years and shouldn't be able to wait until 2008 to fix it. Kathleen Schlach, NPR News, Washington.