



INSPECT & TEST DRIVE

Recall & Safety Check Guide

Five free minutes with a VIN can tell you what the window sticker and the history report won't.

A NOTE FROM OUR TEAM

Checking for open recalls is the easiest, cheapest safety step in the whole buying process, and it's the one buyers skip most. It takes a VIN and a few minutes. Do it before you drive the car, again before you sign, and then keep doing it for as long as you own it.

— The Auto Advocate Team

A recall is issued when a manufacturer or NHTSA determines that a vehicle or its equipment creates an unreasonable safety risk or fails to meet minimum safety standards. Recalls don't disappear when a car is sold, and used cars change hands with unrepaired recalls every day. Here's how to find them, get them fixed at no charge, and judge how safe a vehicle is before you buy it.

17

CHARACTERS IN THE VIN YOU
SEARCH

15 YRS

FREE-REMEDY WINDOW FOR
VEHICLES

5 YRS

FREE-REMEDY WINDOW FOR
TIRES

2×

RECALL CHECKS A YEAR
NHTSA ADVISES

1 Look Up Recalls by VIN

- 1 Find the VIN.** It's 17 characters, visible through the lower-left corner of the windshield, and also on the registration and often the insurance card. On a used car, copy it from the car itself, not just the listing.
- 2 Search it at nhtsa.gov/recalls.** You can also call the NHTSA Vehicle Safety Hotline at 1-888-327-4236. Searching by VIN shows whether *this specific vehicle* still needs a recall repair. Searching by year, make, and model only shows general results.
- 3 Read the result.** A clean result reads "0 unrepaired recalls associated with this VIN." The tool shows only **unrepaired** recalls; completed ones won't appear.
- 4 Check the brand's site too.** The NHTSA tool excludes recalls more than 15 years old (unless the maker offers more coverage), small manufacturers, international vehicles, and some brand-new recalls not yet matched to every VIN.

FROM THE INSIDE

Comparing several used cars? NHTSA's tool lets you **search up to 100 VINs at once**. And when a dealership tells you "recall work is done," ask for the repair order showing the campaign number. Franchised stores can see recall status for their own brand instantly; independent lots and private sellers often can't, which is why you check it yourself.

VIN _____ Year / Make / Model _____
Date checked _____ Open recalls found _____ Fix before delivery? _____

2 Open Recalls on Used Cars

Federal law restricts dealers from selling **new** vehicles with an unremedied recall. That restriction (49 U.S.C. 30120(i)) is written for new vehicles and rental companies, so federal law generally **does not stop a used car from being sold with an open recall**. State rules vary. Either way, the responsibility to check lands on you.

An open recall isn't automatically a reason to walk away. It's a reason to get it fixed, and to know whether the fix is available yet.

BEFORE YOU SIGN ON A CAR WITH AN OPEN RECALL

- ☐ Ask: "Will you complete this recall before delivery?"
- ☐ If yes, get it written into the deal paperwork
- ☐ Ask whether parts are available now or back-ordered
- ☐ Ask whether the recall includes a "do not drive" or "park outside" warning
- ☐ If not fixed, book the repair at a brand dealer right away

3 Getting a Recall Repaired for Free

Manufacturers must remedy a recalled defect by **repairing it, replacing it, or offering a refund** (in rare cases, repurchasing the vehicle). NHTSA tells owners to contact a local dealer to fix the recalled part for free. It doesn't matter whether you're the first owner or the fifth.

- 1 Call a franchised dealer for that brand. Any authorized dealer for the make can typically perform the work, not just the selling dealer.
- 2 Give them the VIN and the recall (campaign) number from the NHTSA result.
- 3 Ask how long the repair takes and whether a loaner is offered.
- 4 Keep the repair order showing the campaign as completed.

THE AGE LIMIT

Under federal law (49 U.S.C. 30120(g)), the free-remedy requirement does not apply if the first purchaser bought the vehicle **more than 15 calendar years** before the recall notice, or the tires **more than 5 calendar years** before. Manufacturers sometimes choose to cover more. On an older vehicle, ask.

4 Crash-Test Ratings: NHTSA and IIHS

NHTSA 5-Star Safety Ratings ([nhtsa.gov/ratings](https://www.nhtsa.gov/ratings))

Government frontal, side, and rollover testing, combined into an Overall Vehicle Score from one to five stars.

- Frontal ratings should only be compared between vehicles in the **same class within 250 pounds**; the overall score follows the same rule
- Side and rollover ratings can be compared across classes
- A safety concern can be flagged separately from the star score; read it

IIHS Ratings & Awards ([iihs.org/ratings](https://www.iihs.org/ratings))

Independent, insurer-funded testing that includes small and moderate overlap front, side, headlights, front crash prevention, seat belt reminders, and LATCH.

- **Top Safety Pick** and **Top Safety Pick+** are awarded each year; criteria get tougher over time
- Awards apply to **specific model years**, sometimes only to vehicles **built after a certain date**
- A used car's award is from its own model year, not today's standard

5 Safety Features Checklist

Trim levels matter, so confirm on the vehicle itself. Names below are NHTSA's; brands use their own. These systems are assistive: NHTSA says **you remain responsible for driving the vehicle**. Try them on the road with **No. 15, Test Drive Checklist & Scorecard**.

FEATURE	VEHICLE A	VEHICLE B	VEHICLE C
Forward collision warning / automatic emergency braking			
Pedestrian automatic emergency braking			
Blind spot warning / blind spot intervention			
Rear cross traffic warning / rear automatic braking			
Lane departure warning / lane keeping assistance			
Backup camera			
Automatic high beams; IIHS headlight rating for this trim			
Tire pressure monitoring system working			
Airbag / SRS light comes on at start, then goes off			
Open recalls (NHTSA VIN result)			

6 After You Buy: Stay on the List

- ☐ Make sure the manufacturer has **your** name and address so recall notices reach you
- ☐ Download NHTSA's **SaferCar** app (iOS / Android) and add your vehicle for recall alerts on your phone
- ☐ Sign up for NHTSA recall email alerts
- ☐ Register tires and car seats with their makers; check tires with NHTSA's tire recall lookup
- ☐ Check your VIN at nhtsa.gov/recalls **twice a year**, as NHTSA recommends
- ☐ Keep every recall repair order with your records

RECALL LOG

DATE CHECKED	CAMPAIGN #	COMPONENT / ISSUE	REPAIRED (DATE & DEALER)

SAFE CAR, FAIR PRICE

You checked the safety. Let us check the deal.

The Buyer Brief includes everything in Trade-In Shield, including a Carfax and dealer-grade bookouts, plus rebate and incentive research, incentivized rates, and used-car offer support or help locating a unit. If a car has open recalls or a weak safety record, we'll help you decide whether it still belongs on your list.

Buyer Brief \$99

(405) 761-3390 • autoadvocacy.net

THE DEALERSHIP HAS EXPERTS. NOW YOU DO, TOO.

SOURCES

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), Recalls: nhtsa.gov/recalls
 49 U.S.C. 30120, Remedies for defects and noncompliance (via Cornell Law School LII): [law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/49/30120](https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/49/30120)
 NHTSA, 5-Star Safety Ratings: nhtsa.gov/ratings
 NHTSA, Driver Assistance Technologies: nhtsa.gov/vehicle-safety/driver-assistance-technologies
 NHTSA, Tire Safety Ratings and Awareness: nhtsa.gov/vehicle-safety/tires
 Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), Top Safety Pick awards and About Our Tests: [iihs.org/ratings](https://www.iihs.org/ratings)
 Federal Trade Commission (FTC), Used Cars (consumer feature): consumer.ftc.gov/features/feature-0040-used-cars

This guide is educational and is not legal advice. Recall coverage, availability of parts, and remedy options are set by the manufacturer and federal law; confirm details for your vehicle with NHTSA and an authorized dealer for that brand.