

## Automakers working to reduce 'new car smell'



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You know that great new car smell? The one that you can't quite put your finger on but that always seems to inspire a rush of pride in new car buyers? Well, it may be toxic.

Research has linked that smell to a toxic cocktail of harmful airborne chemicals. A 2001 study by Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization found that the air in new cars is full of chemicals called volatile organic compounds.

Now, Japanese automakers are promising to reduce those fumes. They vow to cut levels of 13 of the components that make up "new car smell" to match Japanese Health Ministry guidelines for air quality in homes, by 2007.

"Cutting down on the things that lead to these smells is only something that can be better for you," says Toyota spokesman Paul Nolasco.

Volatile organic compounds seep out of a vehicle's plastics, glue, vinyl and upholstery, and include some cancer-causing toxins such as styrene, benzene and formaldehyde.

The Australian researchers found that the level of the compounds in new cars were several times higher than levels considered safe for homes and offices.

The full health effects of these compounds is not well known, but some controlled studies have found they can cause headaches, throat or eye irritation, drowsiness and confusion. Studies has also found that prolonged exposure to some of the chemicals can lead to cancer.

"Just as air inside our homes and workplaces is often much more polluted than the air outside, so sitting in a new car can expose you to levels of toxic emissions many times beyond (health guideline) goals," said Steve Brown, head of the CSIRO's air quality control research unit

"We find new car interiors have much higher VOC levels than any building we've researched," he said.

But Brown says he does not know of any government that has guidelines for volatile organic compound in car interiors.

Automakers worldwide have been trying to reduce volatile organic compounds for years. But the Japanese effort marks the first time the industry has adopted government guidelines, the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association's Tatsuya Ota said.

Several of Japan's top automakers report they have already managed to lower the volatile organic compounds from their vehicle interiors.

If the Japanese are successful, American and European car makers may have to follow suit.

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