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## Don't inhale in new car

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That “new car smell” could be dangerous to your health.

Dangerous enough, in fact, that Japanese auto makers have banded together to set a target for improving the interior air quality in their cars — in addition to continuing to meet exterior emissions standards.

The smell is mostly given off by a group of chemicals known as volatile organic compounds that are ingredients of the plastics, vinyl, paints and glues used in making car interiors and some of which are carcinogens.

The Japanese auto makers, including Toyota Motor Corp., the world's second largest vehicle manufacturer, agreed earlier this year to reduce passenger compartment levels of 13 VOCs to levels that Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare has established for air quality in homes to combat so-called sick-building syndrome. The offensive substances range from styrene and formaldehyde to xylene and diazinon.

The Japanese auto companies plan to apply the new standards starting with vehicles manufactured in 2007, according to the news release issued by the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association — but, at least in the short term, only to new model cars both made and sold in Japan.

The Associated Press news agency reported from Tokyo yesterday that the move — the first industry-wide push against cabin VOCs by car makers in any country — could become a competitive selling point and spur similar action by competing North American and European auto makers.

“There is good potential for the Japanese to take the lead in this field,” Koji Endo, an auto analyst with Credit Suisse First Boston in Tokyo, said. “People are starting to feel that VOCs are an issue, and the new efforts are one advantage that they [Japanese manufacturers] can claim.”

Don't bother telling that to Scott Jones, owner of West Coast Auto Group in the Vancouver area. “All the customers love the new car smell. I love the new car smell,” he said.

However, the issue concerns the environmental activists at Toronto-based Pollution Probe. “You can get very high levels of VOCs from new cars or cars that are sitting in the heat,” Ken Ogilvie, the organization's president said yesterday.

In fact, Pollution Probe is publishing an educational primer on VOCs.

In a brief section on car interiors, the primer cites a 10-year-old U.S. study that found more than 100 VOCs in a new 1995 Lincoln Continental.

“The concentrations dropped significantly over a two-month period, but were still detectable and continued to increase to mid-day as temperatures rose in the car,” the primer says.

Mark Nantais, president of the Canadian Vehicle Manufacturers Association — which includes the Big Three North American auto makers and International Truck and Engine Corp. — said interior air quality is increasingly an issue for vehicle manufacturers everywhere because of the public's concern “from a health standpoint.”

Still, Mr. Nantais also figures an attack on passenger-compartment VOCs specifically may not be necessary. He said yesterday that standards for vehicle emissions of all sorts are already “so stringent that they have forced manufacturers to look at interior components, adhesives and all sorts of stuff because [the substances] have been contributing to evaporative emissions which cause a vehicle to fail test requirements.”

The auto makers, he added, “are constantly looking at new materials, at substituting materials, with a view to minimizing those types of emissions.”

A spokeswoman for Health Canada said yesterday that while the government sets standards for VOC emissions for new houses and for office and industrial premises, car interiors are not subject to comparable rules.

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