

Safety — You Asked for It

An average new car today costs more than four times more than it did 20 years ago. Some of this increase is due to inflation. However, much more is the result of consumers demanding — and getting — added safety and reliability features in their vehicles. While car makers must meet certain federal standards, each manufacturer comes up with its own designs, so costs vary.

Nevertheless, many current costs are legitimate. Consider the miserably cold and snowy winter suffered in the Northeast during 1996, when newer cars started each morning during record low temperatures. This was not the case in decades past. We've asked for side impact protection and other new safety features to protect our families. Now we are being asked to pay the price for these improvements.

Maybe it's time for consumers to stop and consider the costs to deliver all the improved reliability and safety features we now take for granted. Safety belts, head restraints, child proof locks, overall vehicle safety design, air bags, anti-lock brakes

and more, are being constantly improved by manufacturers — saving lives every year.

Not all improvements are uniformly heralded. For example, insurance companies give variable discounts for cars with anti-lock brakes because they say tests are inconclusive that they improve crash avoidance. Some companies insist drivers don't know how to use anti-locks effectively — thus they don't discount at all.

In general, performance of safety features varies according to manufacturer design and so should be shopped carefully. Pay attention too, to important crash test results and other surveys performed by government agencies and private firms such as J.D. Power and Associates and *Consumer Reports*. Remember that pick-ups, vans and utility vehicles are not required to meet all of the same safety standard as cars — another reason for you to shop cautiously.

The bottom line regarding new car safety and reliability at a fair price still requires you to be a knowledgeable consumer when you buy.