

Oil Changes Pose Fire Hazard

By John Eddie Williams, Jr. and Todd A. Smith

Be careful after you have taken your 2003 or 2004 Honda CR-V into the dealership to get the oil changed for the first time. Your car may burst into flames.

A woman driving on a major road in Virginia noticed smoke coming from under the hood of her 2003 CR-V. A passerby told her that her car was on fire. She pulled over to the shoulder just as the electrical system shorted out and the doors locked. She escaped without injury.

A North Carolina family on their way to church on Sunday in May noticed smoke and rushed to unbuckle their two small children from their safety seats and escape before their CR-V went up in flames.

A Georgia man, driving home from a flea market, stopped on the road when he saw smoke coming from his vehicle. When he tried to open the hood to investigate, he heard an explosion and the front end of his CR-V burst into flames.

While there were no injuries reported, the fires destroyed numerous vehicles, many of which had less than 10,000 miles on their odometers.

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) investigated the reports and determined that the fires resulted from oil filters improperly installed by the dealership or someone else.

Working with American Honda Motor Company, the NHTSA was able to determine that the fires were caused when oil from the filters leaked onto the vehicle's hot exhaust system and quickly ignited.

While Honda has taken action to make sure that technicians working on the CR-V are aware that they need to be particularly careful replacing the oil filter, some consumer advocates believe the company's response has been lacking.

"Relatively new cars catching on fire? Running the risk of injuring their occupants? It's a very unusual and a very dangerous situation," said Sally Greenberg of Consumers Union, publisher of Consumer Reports. The fact that a routine oil change could have such catastrophic results suggests "a dire and a dangerous situation that both the automaker and the auto safety agency should have looked much more closely at," she said.

Honda maintains that there is no design defect, and has no plans to recall the vehicles to install some sort of barrier to block oil from hitting the hot exhaust manifold.

Further, Honda has no plans to send an alert to customers who change their vehicle's oil themselves.

The current situation is perhaps best summed up by Kay C. Brittain of Jacksonville, Florida, who experienced a fire in her Honda as she was driving back to her office after the vehicle's very first oil change. "It just scares me. Here I'm sitting with a brand new car...I don't want this to happen to somebody else. If there is a problem, I think Honda should acknowledge it and at least check this out and not write it off."

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