

ATVs: ACCIDENTS WAITING TO HAPPEN?

Since they were introduced in the early 1970s, ATVs (all-terrain vehicles) have become increasingly popular. With this popularity comes an increasing number of accidents and injuries—according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, approximately 136,000 injuries and 700 deaths occur every year. Children under the age of 16 account for over one-third of all ATV-related injuries. Between 1983 and 2005, over 2,175 children died from ATV-related accidents.

Design Problems

The reason ATVs are so dangerous has a lot to do with their design. They have no frame protecting the operator in the event of an accident. They ride on large, low-pressure tires that can have difficulty gripping the rough terrain over which they travel. They are stopped by hand-operated brakes, which can lack sufficient power and can cause ATVs to overturn as they stop.

ATVs have relatively large engines for their size and weight, which means they can travel as fast as 70 mph, often across broken, uneven terrain. Although most ATVs are not designed for passengers, it is possible (even easy) for people to jump on—people who will be injured if there is a crash. Earlier three-wheeled ATVs were less stable than the current four-wheeled versions, but even the four-wheeled models can be top-heavy and prone to serious rollover accidents. Even on roads and flat surfaces, ATVs can be unstable.

Consent Decree

As the result of safety concerns expressed by the federal government, ATV manufacturers entered into a consent decree in 1988. In this decree, they agreed to halt production of three-wheeled ATVs, to provide safety training for new owners, to place warning labels on their products, and to make recommendations about what size of ATV is appropriate for different age groups. Although this consent decree expired in 1998, ATV manufacturers have pledged to continue to follow most of its provisions. However, the government can no longer force them to do so.

Despite these improvements, the number of injuries and deaths per year attributable to ATV accidents continues to rise. To some degree, this is because ATVs continue to become more popular, and more people ride them. However, another reason for the increase in injuries and deaths is that ATV makers are building more powerful ATVs and marketing them to younger and younger riders.

In addition to making more powerful ATVs, ATV makers have fought attempts to impose regulations on ATV ownership or use (such as age limits and mandatory helmet laws). With the expiration of the 1988 consent decree, it will take either new laws passed by Congress or new action by federal agencies (such as the Consumer Product Safety Commission) for ATV manufacturers and dealers to change their practices when it comes to safety.

Right now the only kind of regulation available is the “private” regulation that comes with lawsuits, and self-regulation by ATV owners. The best tactic is to prevent or minimize the extent of injuries before they happen. ATV riders (adults and kids) should be aware of the risks and take proper common sense precautions like wearing a helmet and other protective gear. Owners should take an ATV driver training course. It is also important for ATV owners to carry adequate insurance to cover potential injuries.

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