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Cars in Europe to self-dial emergency services

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By 2009 all new cars built in Europe may be able to call emergency services automatically in the event of a crash, under a deal signed this week by car makers, technology firms and the European Commission.

The eCall action plan was agreed to Thursday by Europe's 13 major carmakers, which account for 95 percent of all passen cars made in Western Europe, and technology firms including Microsoft Corp. and Bosch GmbH. The plan calls for all new vehicles to be fitted with an automatic calling device by 2009 at the latest.

In the event of a crash, the device will call the emergency services to report the exact location of the vehicle. By providing accurate location information it is hoped that the scheme will drastically cut emergency response times, allowing injuries t treated more quickly and potentially saving lives.

"With this technology, your car could save your life," said European Information Society Commissioner Vivian Reding. Advanced information and communications technologies have great potential to improve road safety, she said. The Commission believes the eCall scheme could save as many as 2,000 lives each year in Europe.

Under the action plan, car makers and technology firms have until the end of the year to agree on the required technology standards and specifications, until 2006 to conduct field tests and until 2009 to introduce the technology in new vehicles. eCall plan could help remove technological and commercial barriers to the take-up of life-saving road safety barrier system Europe, the Commission said.

The technology will use the single European emergency number (112), which routes emergency calls to the nearest call center. For the eCall system to work, member states will need to equip or upgrade their emergency services call centers to process its location reports by 2007.

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