How to Check a Used Car for Recalls Before You Buy in South Dakota

Why Checking for Recalls Matters When Buying a Used Car

Buying a used car is a big decision. You look at mileage, test the brakes, and check for rust. But one thing many buyers overlook is whether the car has open recalls. A recall is a safety or emissions issue that the manufacturer has identified and agreed to fix at no cost. The problem is that not every recalled vehicle gets repaired. Many used cars on the lot still have unfixed recalls, and if you buy one, you might end up driving a car with a known defect. In South Dakota, where winter roads can be tough on vehicles and rural driving is common, knowing what you are getting into matters even more.

The good news is that checking for recalls is straightforward. You just need the vehicle identification number, or VIN. That 17-character code holds a lot of information about the car, including its recall history. This guide walks you through the process, explains what to look for, and points out a few things to watch out for along the way.

What a VIN Tells You About a Used Car

Every car built after 1981 has a unique VIN. It is stamped on the dashboard near the windshield, on the driver's side door jamb, and on the vehicle title and registration. The VIN encodes details like the manufacturer, model year, engine type, and plant where it was built. But for recall purposes, the most important part is that the VIN lets you check the car's history against the manufacturer's recall database and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) records.

When you run a VIN check, you typically get a report that shows past accidents, title issues, odometer readings, and service records. Not all of those reports include recall data, though. Some third-party services charge extra for recall information, and even then, the data may not be complete. The most reliable way to check recalls is to use free resources directly from the government or the automaker.

How to Check for Recalls Yourself

The NHTSA runs a free online tool at nhtsa.gov/recalls. You enter the VIN, and it pulls up any open safety recalls for that vehicle. The result will tell you the recall number, a brief description of the problem, and what the manufacturer plans to do to fix it. If the recall has already been repaired, the record will show that too. This tool is updated regularly, so it is usually the most current source of recall information.

Another option is to check the manufacturer's own website. Most automakers have a recall lookup page where you can enter the VIN and see recalls specific to that brand. Some dealers can also check for you if you have the VIN handy. If you are buying from a private seller, ask for the VIN before you meet, and run the check ahead of time. That way you are not wasting your weekend driving to see a car that has a serious unresolved issue.

What to Do If You Find an Open Recall

Finding an open recall does not automatically mean you should walk away from the deal. Many recalls are minor, like a software update or a loose trim piece. Others are serious, such as a faulty airbag or a steering component that could fail. The key is to understand the severity of the recall and whether the seller is willing to get it fixed before you buy. If the car is still under warranty or the recall is recent, the dealership that originally sold it may be required to perform the repair for free, even if you are not the original owner. However, some private sellers may not want to deal with the hassle, and you might have to arrange the repair yourself after purchase.

If the recall is a safety-critical issue, consider asking the seller to have it repaired before you hand over any money. You can also contact a local dealer to see if they will perform the repair for the current owner. In many cases, the manufacturer will cover the cost regardless of ownership, but it is always a good idea to confirm first.

VIN Check South Dakota: What Makes It Different

Every state has its own rules for vehicle registration and title transfers, but the process of checking recalls is national. Still, there are a few things specific to South Dakota that can affect your used car search. For one, South Dakota has a large number of vehicles that are registered in rural areas and may have been driven on unpaved roads, which can accelerate wear on components like suspension and brakes. Those parts are sometimes covered by recalls, but more often they are just regular maintenance items. A thorough VIN check can help you separate actual safety defects from normal wear and tear.

Another factor is that South Dakota does not require a safety inspection for most vehicles. That means a used car could have an open recall and still be sold without anyone noticing. The responsibility falls on you as the buyer to do the homework. Running a VIN check South Dakota style is really just the same as running one anywhere else, but it becomes more important because there is no inspection system catching the issues for you. Local dealerships and private sellers alike may not be aware of outstanding recalls, so do not assume they have checked.

Common Mistakes When Checking Recalls

One mistake people make is assuming that a clean Carfax report means no recalls. Carfax and similar services include recall data, but they do not always have the most recent information. A recall that was issued last week might not show up on a third-party report for months. The NHTSA database is usually faster, but even it can lag a bit. If you are looking at a brand-new used car, say a 2024 model that was just released, some recalls may not be published yet. In those cases, check back after a few weeks or ask the manufacturer directly.

Another common error is thinking that a recall repair is optional. Legally, manufacturers are required to fix safety recalls at no cost, but there is no law forcing you to get the repair done. That means you can drive an unrepaired car indefinitely, but you are taking a risk. Insurance companies may also view an open recall as a factor if you file a claim related to that defect. So even if you buy the car as-is, plan to get any safety recall fixed as soon as possible.

When to Walk Away from a Deal

Not every recall is a dealbreaker, but some are. If the recall involves the airbags, brakes, steering, or fuel system, and the seller is unwilling to have it fixed, it is probably not worth the risk. The same goes for recalls that have been open for years, because that may indicate the manufacturer no longer has parts available or the repair is complicated. In those cases, you could be left with a car that cannot be legally repaired, which affects its resale value and safety.

On the other hand, a minor recall like a software glitch for the infotainment system is not a reason to walk away. Use your judgment based on the specific recall and how it affects the car's drivability and safety. If you are unsure, a trusted mechanic can give you an opinion based on the recall description.

Putting It All Together

Buying a used car in South Dakota means you are responsible for your own due diligence. The state's lack of mandatory safety inspections puts the burden on you to check for problems, including open recalls. A simple VIN check can reveal issues that the seller may not even know about, saving you from a costly repair or a dangerous situation down the road. Use the free NHTSA tool, verify with the manufacturer, and ask questions before you sign anything.

Every used car has a history, and the VIN is the key to unlocking it. Whether you are buying from a dealer in Sioux Falls or a private seller in Rapid City, taking ten minutes to run a VIN check South Dakota yourself is time well spent. It is a small step that gives you peace of mind and helps ensure the car you drive is as safe as it looks.