

## Safe Driving Tips

Safe, courteous driving is no accident. By knowing and following the rules of the road and staying alert, you'll enjoy your time behind the wheel.

Have you ever been cut off in traffic, tailgated, nearly broadsided by a red-light runner or aggravated to the boiling point by rude drivers? Unfortunately, the answer to these questions is more than likely, "Yes, many times."

Driver error is responsible for 85 percent of all traffic accidents. Each year one in five drivers is involved in an accident, according to the National Safety Council. Over a lifetime, 86 percent of all drivers will have an accident. With 164 million drivers now in the U.S., and more on the way, there's a lot of potential for accidents caused by driver error.

The sad result is more than 21 million accidents a year involving more than 36 million drivers. In 1989, 45,555 people died in traffic accidents and 1.8 million suffered disabling injuries. The cost to the nation was a staggering \$70 billion.

With traffic congestion growing worse, the National Automobile Dealers Association and its new-car dealer members feel the time has come for a refresher course on safe and sane driving. The following driving tips and basic rules of the road are intended to improve driving skills, knowledge and manners. The goal is to reduce stress, increase your driving pleasure and maybe even save your life.

### **Before You Start**

Good driving starts before you put the key in the ignition. To be at your best you should be alert, comfortable and safe. So, like an airline pilot, follow this simple checklist before you take off:

- **Don't drink and drive.** Half of all traffic fatalities are alcohol related. With a blood alcohol level of 0.10, the legal limit for drunk drivers in most states, drivers are 12 times as likely to be in an accident as non-drinking drivers. At a level of 0.15, they are 380 times more likely to be in an accident! Even at half the legal limit, 0.05, drinking drivers are still twice as likely to be involved in a collision. Similar odds face drivers on drugs, including prescription drugs and even over-the-counter medications. In short, an impaired driver, even slightly impaired, is a bad driver.
- **Buckle up.** Even if your car has an air bag or automatic shoulder belts, you still need to wear both lap and shoulder belts to be protected in side and rollover crashes. Safety belts have proven to reduce chances of serious injury or death in an accident by 50 percent, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety administration. Belts are effective in both high- and low-speed accidents, so they should be worn at all times. Remember, most accidents occur within 25 miles of home at speeds of 40 miles per hour or less.
- **Buckle up children and pets.** If they are not securely restrained, active children and pets can easily distract drivers and cause accidents or may be seriously harmed in accidents. All 50 states now require that infants and small children be restrained in infant carriers, special safety seats or, in some cases, regular adult safety belts. Child seats should be installed according to manufacturer instructions. Pets should be placed in carriers that can be belted in. Never drive with children or pets on your lap.
- **Make all the necessary adjustments.** Before you set out, make sure the driver's seat, steering wheel (if adjustable), seat belts, head restraints and rear- and side-view mirrors are positioned for

maximum comfort, control and visibility. Check your map in advance so you know where you are going, and select your favorite radio station or tapes before you take off so you never have to take your eyes off the road once under way.

- **Be in the right frame of mind.** This isn't always easy, but it's important. If you are fatigued or emotionally upset, don't get behind the wheel.

### **Attention, Please!**

Despite today's demanding traffic conditions, it's not uncommon to see drivers putting on makeup, reading the newspaper or talking on the phone with one hand, taking notes with the other and steering with their knee.

This might be a funny sight except that driving is serious business, deadly serious. **Traffic accidents are the number-one killer of Americans under 40 years old.** You are playing Russian roulette when you fail to give full time and attention to your driving. There is a lot going on out there, and you may be called upon at any moment to respond to an emergency. To make sure **you** don't become a statistic, follow these basic driving tips:

- **Drive defensively.** Drive your car like it's made of glass in a crowd of stone throwers. Always try to foresee trouble, and never expect the other driver to do the right thing.

- **Think ahead.** Be on the lookout for developing situations in traffic at least 12 - 15 seconds ahead. Your eyes should be like radar, constantly scanning between the traffic ahead, your rear- and side-view mirrors and the speedometer.

- **Expect the unexpected.** Be prepared for a child or pet to dart into the street, a piece of furniture to fall off a truck or a drunk driver to suddenly weave in front of your car. Always give yourself room to brake for or, better yet, maneuver around an emergency. Keep a constant vigil for escape routes, such as a break in traffic, an off-ramp, a wide median, or the road's shoulder.

- **Be smooth.** Good drivers are more like ballet dancers than linebackers. Smoothness, finesse and sensitivity win every time over sudden, jerky motions that increase the chances of skids and loss of control. Unless your car has an anti-lock braking system, don't jam on the brakes. Squeeze the brake pedal with the ball of your foot (not your toes) in a firm, controlled movement. Don't ride your brakes. Brake in advance of curves. Turn smoothly and accelerate gracefully. Good drivers don't over-rev their engines or squeal their tires.

- **Be patient.** When traffic is jammed, sit back, relax and think nice thoughts. You'll get there.

### **A Dozen Deadly Sins**

Bad driving habits and manners are more than irksome and rude. They are dangerous and illegal. We need more courtesy and cooperation on the road, and bad driving just adds to the congesting and general aggravation. If you see yourself in this list, it's never too late to change.

- **Going too fast.** It's a simple fact of physics: The faster you go, the less time you have to react to emergencies, the harder you hit and the greater your chances of death or serious injury in an accident. Speeding is responsible for 30 percent of all fatal crashes. It is also the main reason two out of three fatal accidents occur on rural highways, although most accidents happen in urban areas. So who wants to die or get tickets? Simply obey speed limits as you match your speed to traffic, road and weather conditions and your driving ability.

- **Going too slow.** Although drivers seldom get ticketed for this it is a major irritant to other motorists. If you see traffic backing up behind you, look for an opportunity to move over or even pull off the road. On a multi-lane highway, merge quickly, matching the traffic's rate of speed, then stay in the lane that is moving at the most comfortable speed for you. Don't hog the left lane.

- **Tailgating.** Related to both of the above, following too close to the car ahead is a dangerous habit. People don't realize that at 60 miles per hour it takes the average car 120 - 160 feet to stop. At 80 miles per hour, it takes 220 to over 300 feet to stop. If you are being tailgated look for an opportunity to move over.

- **Bad passing.** Keep right except to pass; pass in a smooth, progressive manner, and move back over as soon as you can clearly see the car in your rear-view mirror. Don't "slingshot" around other vehicles. If someone wants to pass you, don't speed up to make it more difficult or impossible. Pass only on the left. Passing on the right is against the law in some places; it is more dangerous because you are less visible to other drivers, who generally don't expect to be passed on the right. Never use the shoulder, or "breakdown" lane, to skirt traffic, and never, never try to back up on the shoulder if you have missed your exit ramp or turn. To most police departments, those are serious offenses.

- **Failure to use turn signals.** Your chances of preventing an accident are great - even if you make a mistake - if other drivers know what you are going to do well in advance of turning or making lane changes. And once you have used them, don't forget to turn them off.

- **Poor lane discipline.** The rules are simple, but widely ignored. Stay in your lane. Don't ride the center line, drift from side to side, zig-zag through traffic, bully your way into another lane or hog the fast lane. When changing lanes, look before you leap. Even with your mirrors adjusted properly you can't see what is happening one lane over. So turn your head and look over your shoulder for a last-second check, and always use your turn signals. Pay attention to lane markers and traffic light arrows.

- **Not allowing a merge.** We do a lot of lane merging today - entrance and exit ramps, three lanes to two, two to one, etc. When it is the other driver's turn to merge, let him or her in. This simple act of courtesy is the fastest and most logical way to move traffic.

- **Failure to yield!** That triangular sign means what it says. It doesn't mean hit the gas, come to a complete stop, or muscle your way into traffic. If there is no yield sign, the rules of the road dictate that cars entering the roadway always yield to those on the roadway, and cars making a left-hand turn must yield to oncoming traffic. At an intersection with four-way stop signs, the first one to arrive has the right of way. Otherwise, yield to the car on your right.

Never hesitate to pull over for an emergency vehicle with its lights flashing or siren on. Failure to yield right of way immediately can endanger you, your passengers and the people the emergency vehicle is trying to reach.

In addition, motorists should always yield to pedestrians, even if there is no crosswalk; give motorcycles and bicycles the same rights and courtesies as any other vehicle; and come to a complete stop in both directions (unless it is on a divided highway) for school buses displaying stop signs and flashing red lights.

- **Ignoring red lights and stop signs.** This is like forgetting to breathe. Stopping for red lights and stop signs is the most basic rule of driving. If it is ignored, you could be responsible for a serious accident. A red light - solid or blinking - or stop sign means STOP, completely. A yellow

light means caution. It does not mean accelerating to push your way through an intersection. If you have time to brake when the light changes to yellow, do it!

To protect yourself from red-light and stop-sign runners, be cautious at all intersections, even if you have the right of way. Look both ways before proceeding through an intersection, and be prepared to brake or take evasive action. At 30 miles per hour, you can stop 20-25 feet sooner if you have your foot on the brake, and by pulling to the right you can slow your car faster and usually stay out of harm's way.

- **Blocking an intersection.** This is selfish and inconsiderate. Try to anticipate the traffic flow, and never drive into an intersection when you know there is no chance to make it across before the traffic light changes. If you have blocked a pedestrian crosswalk, don't back up. People may already be walking behind you.

- **Bad manners.** This includes a host of sins - cursing, obscene gestures, excessive horn honking, loud stereo, refusing to merge, littering (including cigarette butts) and just about any other act of rudeness or selfishness that fouls the driving environment. A little more courtesy and consideration by all of us could make driving safer and more pleasurable.

- **Ignorance.** In a 1989 poll of 500 drivers, 92 percent considered themselves good or excellent drivers. Yet a third of those drivers incorrectly believed that a flashing red traffic light meant to "proceed with caution." (It means come to a complete stop, then proceed with caution.) In this case, ignorance could be fatal. So make sure you have a thorough knowledge of all traffic laws, signs and markings. Once you know them, obey them.

### **Big Trucks**

The number of big trucks on the road has tripled since 1970. And while cars have been getting smaller, trucks have been getting bigger. With an allowable gross vehicle weight of 80,000 pounds, tractor-trailer rigs can weigh up to 40 times as much as the average subcompact car. Not surprisingly, in fatal crashes involving cars and tractor-trailers, car occupants are killed 49 times as often as the truck occupants. The best way to avoid becoming one of these statistics is to understand the limitations of big trucks and follow these do's and don'ts.

- **Don't brake quickly or cut in front of a truck.** The reason is simple. Trucks need almost 50 percent more distance than cars to stop from 55 mph (196 vs. 133 feet, according to tests conducted by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety). If the weather is bad or the truck's brakes are hot, it can take three times longer to stop. When passing, entering a highway or braking, always leave a lot more distance between your car and a tractor-trailer.

- **Do pass with care.** A large truck takes longer to get around, so allow yourself more room and time to pass. Start farther back to see that the road is clear, pass quickly, and wait until you can see the front of the cab in your rear-view mirror before you return to the same lane. If it is raining, be extremely cautious and, if it is a two-lane road, pass only if necessary. The water spray from a truck can be blinding, and federal law prohibits the truck driver from giving you any kind of signal to pass. Just relax, you'll get there.

- **Do let trucks pass.** To conserve fuel, truckers try their best to maintain a steady speed. But because they need more braking time and accelerate more slowly than cars, they often go faster downhill and slower uphill. For that reason, many drivers don't like to follow them and sometimes speed up when the truck tries to pass. The result is often 20 tons of truck riding your bumper - definitely not a good situation. Remember, on many multi-lane roads, trucks are prohibited from using the left lane and must use the center lane for passing. So move over.

- **Don't tailgate.** Why would you want to? The truck driver can't see you back there and you can't see any of the road ahead. In bad weather, the spray reduces visibility to virtually zero.
- **Don't travel in the driver's blind spot.** Beside a truck, just behind the doors, is another blind spot. Don't hang around there. The truck may try a lane change and not see you. If you can, always allow trucks enough room to change lanes.
- **Do stay well away.** When passing, being passed or meeting big trucks coming the other way, be aware that they push a large wave of air, like the bow of a boat, which can cause turbulence, particularly with small cars. So stay as far away as possible.
- **Do beware of runaway trucks.** When driving mountain roads or any long downhill grade, keep an eye in your mirror for a fast-approaching truck.  
Never stop at the entrance to a runaway-truck ramp.
- **Do allow trucks room to turn.** Trucks require a wide turning area; in town, they often swing to the left before making right turns. Watch their turn signals and give them room. Never turn inside a truck taking a right.

### **Beware of the Dark**

Although there is much less traffic, more than half of all accidents occur after dark. The most dangerous time is between 9:00 p.m. and 3:00 a.m. on weekends. One explanation is that there are three times as many alcohol-related crashes at night. But the fact remains, drivers simply can't see as well at night, particularly older drivers. When the sun sets, remember to:

- **Slow down.** Reduce your speeds at night to compensate for lost visibility, and never over-drive your headlights.
- **Dim your high beams.** In most states it is illegal to use high beams within 500 feet of an oncoming vehicle. High beams can blind the other driver, particularly older drivers, who take up to eight times as long to recover from glare as a teenager. Be considerate; dim your high beams to oncoming traffic, as well as vehicles you approach from the rear.
- **Divert your eyes.** When you meet high beams head on, don't stare into them. Look to the right edge of the road. Safety experts recommend that you not flick your high beams to warn the other driver, although this is common practice. Never, however, should you get even by leaving your own high beams on. This only increases the chances of an accident.
- **Focus driving lights.** Many sporty models today have an extra set of driving or fog lights. Although they can aid drivers in the fog or on certain dark country lanes, these lights should be used sparingly in well-lighted urban areas, and they should be kept focused on the road, not shining up in the trees or into the eyes of oncoming drivers.

**Slippin' and Slidin'**

At 40 miles per hour, a car that takes 110 feet to stop on dry pavement will take 200 feet to stop in the rain, 350 feet in gravel and 770 feet on ice. Driving is a different game when the going gets slippery. It's best to play by these rules:

- **Plan ahead.** Know in advance how to get to your destination, and avoid roads that might be closed, unplowed or congested. If you are planning a long trip, leave earlier and pay attention to weather reports.
- **Make sure you can see and be seen.** Whenever you turn on the windshield wipers, turn on the headlights. In the snow, clean off the whole car, paying particular attention to all lights and glass areas.
- **Proceed in slow motion.** Enemies of traction in the snow are excessive speed and sudden movements of the brake, steering or gas. Slow down; anticipate lane changes, turns, curves and braking much farther in advance; and concentrate on making smooth, precise movements.
- **Don't spin your wheels.** A spinning wheel gathers no traction, so start slow and easy. On snow and ice, point the front wheels straight to reduce resistance. If stuck, rock the vehicle gently by going between a forward and reverse gear. (Consult your owner's manual to make sure this procedure will not damage your transmission.)
- **Keep going.** By watching traffic farther ahead and giving yourself more room to maneuver and brake, you can reduce stops and starts. Shift gears smoothly and stay in the highest gear possible. Let your momentum carry you up and over hills, slowing at the crest. Never use cruise control when road conditions are slippery, and keep a watchful eye out for bridges, shady spots and the bottom of hills, where water gathers and ice forms first.
- **Maintain a reasonable speed.** Always drive at a speed that matches the prevailing visibility, traffic and road conditions, and your driving ability. Roads are slickest when it first starts to rain because oil on the road rises to the surface.
- **Squeeze the brake gently.** If you feel the wheels begin to lock up, ease off the brake and reapply gently. However, if your car has an anti-lock brake system (ABS), you can apply the brakes as hard as you like. Don't be alarmed at a pulsating feeling in the brake pedal. This is the system at work, preventing wheel lockup so you can simply steer past obstacles. Despite this big advantage, however braking distances are still much longer, even with ABS. Owners of four-wheel-drive or front-wheel-drive cars and trucks also should note that, although these vehicles offer greater traction in rain and snow, they don't stop any faster.
- **Don't panic.** If you skid, don't brake, hit the gas or jerk the wheel. Take your foot off the gas and, if the car has a manual transmission, depress the clutch.  
 In a rear-wheel skid, the most common, carefully steer in the direction of the skid. When the car stops skidding, accelerate gently and steer it back on course. If your car has rear-wheel drive and you over-correct the first skid, be prepared for fish-tailing, or a rear-wheel skid in the opposite direction.  
 In a front-wheel skid, don't turn the steering wheel, since the sideways skid of the front wheels will help slow the vehicle. Wait for the front wheels to grip, then steer gently in the desired direction. As a last resort, use a snow bank as a brake.
- **Skid control requires skill,** so practice these maneuvers in a safe, open area, such as an abandoned parking lot, before you have to use them on the road.

- **Avoid hydroplaning.** Hydroplaning is when the tires literally float over an area of standing water or slush, usually at high speeds. It results in a nearly total loss of control as the tires lose contact with the road surface. The best defenses are to have tires with good tread and to travel at low speeds with a watchful eye for potential trouble.
- **Don't drive into standing water.** You wouldn't dive head first into a swimming pool without knowing how deep it was, so don't go driving pell-mell into large areas of standing water. When driving through large puddles or lots of slush, dry your brakes by gently applying pressure to the gas and brake pedals at the same time.

### **Car Health**

Last, but certainly not least, is the health of your car. Before you hit the road, make sure it is in good mechanical condition, and know what to do if it fails.

- **Check fluid levels.** Oil, antifreeze, brake fluid, automatic transmission fluid and power steering fluid are the lifebloods of your car. They should all be checked frequently, and you should keep an eye out for signs of leaks where you park. Take your car in for maintenance and repairs if it begins to make any sounds or actions that are out of the ordinary.
- **Safety checks.** Your safety depends on your car's brakes, exhaust system, tires, lights, windshield wipers and washers, battery, hoses and belts. Make sure they are not worn and are in good working order.
- **Tire inflation.** Few people realize that underinflated or worn tires offer far less steering, handling and braking control than properly inflated tires. Check your tires regularly.
- **Emergency equipment.** In case of breakdowns or emergencies, it is smart to carry the following items: tire gauge, ice scraper, flashlight and extra batteries, flares or reflectors, pencil and notebook, blanket, gloves, fire extinguisher, extra fan belts and such basic tools as screwdrivers, pliers, adjustable wrench and lug wrench. You also should know how to change a flat tire. Know where the jack and spare tire are kept; know how to use the jack; and make sure the spare has air.
- **Mechanical problems.** If you have mechanical problems or your engine dies while you are driving, carefully pull off the road and seek help. If the oil light goes on, pull out of traffic as quickly as possible then and turn the engine off. If your brakes fail, steer off the road, if possible; try pumping the brakes to build up pressure, shift to a lower gear, and use the emergency brake. If the accelerator sticks open, never reach down and try to pull the pedal up. Instead, put the car in neutral, brake and turn the ignition off. If you turn the engine off first, you'll lose your power steering and the car becomes difficult to steer.

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Courtesy of National Automobile Dealers Association