

defensive driving



What is defensive driving?

It is not enough to consider yourself a law-abiding driver. If you are, your chances of being involved in a road accident are certainly lessened – but there is still room for further reducing the possibilities of collision.

Your chances of a road accident will be further reduced if you practise the system of defensive driving which means driving so as to prevent accidents in spite of the actions of others or the presence of adverse driving conditions.

In order to do this, the defensive driver must:

1. Recognise the hazard.

Think about what is going to happen as far ahead as possible. Never assume 'everything will be all right'.

2. Understand the defence.

There are specific ways of handling specific situations. Learn them and apply them when the need arises.

3. Act in time.

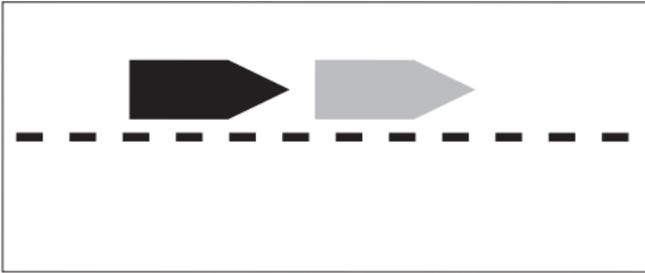
Never take a 'wait-and-see' attitude.

The two-car crash

All two-car crashes start in one of the situations described on the following pages. For each there's a simple defence.

Vehicle ahead

You are following another driver in a stream of traffic. The driver ahead of you stops suddenly. You jam on your brakes but too late to prevent a crash.



Defence

1. Stay alert.

Expect the driver ahead of you to brake at any time without warning or apparent reason. Look for clues that the driver is going to stop. Vehicle slows down. Directional signals blink. Brake lights go on.

2. Stay ahead of the situation.

Watch as far ahead as you can. Keep an eye on side roads. Often you will see when the driver in front of you may have to slow or stop suddenly.

Watch for:

- ◆ vehicles entering from side roads;
- ◆ traffic signals ahead;
- ◆ someone cutting into your lane further on;
and
- ◆ road repairs ahead.

3. Stay back.

Don't underestimate your stopping distance. Even with good brakes it takes a lot of room.

Stay behind at least one vehicle length for every 15 kilometres per hour of speed. On wet or icy roads, double that distance.

Watch out for:

- ◆ frosty, wet or loose gravel – two to six times more stopping distance needed;
- ◆ tightly packed traffic – makes keeping your distance difficult; and
- ◆ smaller vehicles – they can stop quickly.

4. Start stopping sooner.

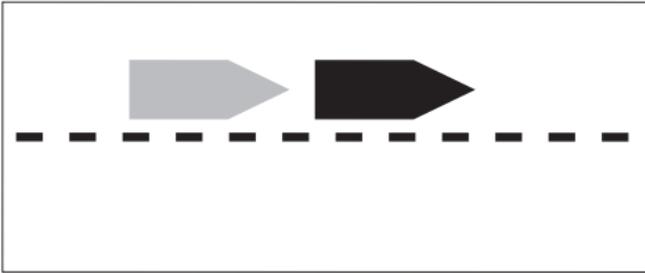
When you know you will have to stop, slow down gradually. Don't wait until the last moment. Delayed braking is dangerous. Start slowing down at once.

Avoid:

- ◆ unnecessary sudden stops; and
- ◆ speed too fast for road or weather conditions.

Vehicle behind

You are driving along with someone following you. You know what you are going to do, but the driver behind you doesn't. You slow down suddenly for a turn and without warning ... crunch!



Defence

1. Stop smoothly.

A gradual stop gives the following driver time to react and space to stop.

2. Signal.

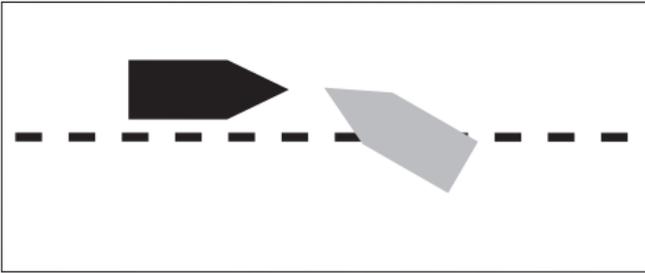
Signal your intentions well before you slow or stop. Flash your brake lights, and use a turn signal to show unmistakably what you are going to do.

3. Keep clear.

Some drivers follow too closely. When this happens to you, slow down and encourage the other driver to pass. Even if the driver doesn't, this gives you both an extra margin for a safe stop.

Meeting a vehicle

If you are not driving defensively you could drift over into the oncoming traffic lane; or you could start to turn right in front of approaching traffic. Perhaps a car coming towards you crosses the centre line. These situations could mean a head on collision, the deadliest crash of all.



Defence

1. Stay left.

If an oncoming vehicle crosses the centre line, warn the driver with your horn or lights. Never try to dodge by pulling right. He or she may suddenly realise the predicament and instinctively swerve back into the proper lane, colliding with you.

2. Watch out for curves.

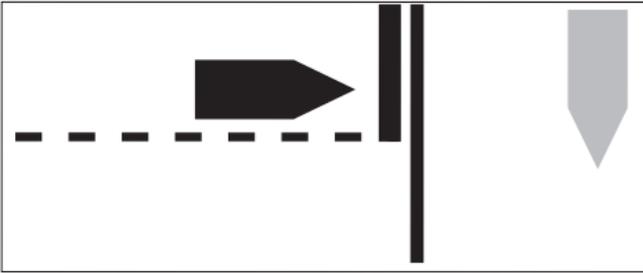
The only way to beat the law of centrifugal force is to slow down before entering a curve, then pick up speed as the curve permits. Stay on your side of the road.

3. Let traffic clear.

When making a right turn, wait for a safe opening. While stopped, keep your wheels straight ahead so if a car hits you from the rear, it won't knock you into oncoming traffic. Watch out for hidden vehicles overtaking any slowed or stopped vehicles facing you.

Vehicle at intersection

You approach an intersection and another car approaches from the side road. The other driver should give way but ignores the give way rule, or drives through a stop sign, or ignores a red light. You could be dead right – but dead.



Defence

1. Be prepared.

Never assume that the other driver will yield the right-of-way. Approach each intersection with caution and be prepared to stop if necessary.

2. Look both ways.

As you approach an intersection, look right – traffic from this direction could be closer – then look left to make sure other traffic is yielding. When you are near the intersection, check again for unusual or unsuspected action on either side.

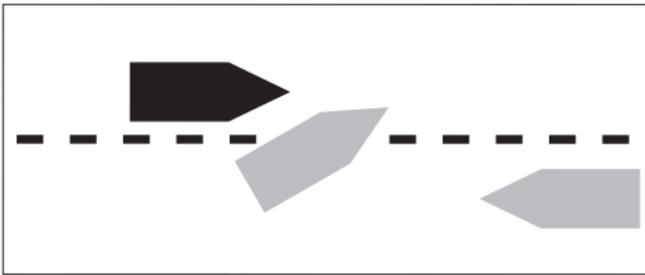
3. Don't fight it.

You have the right to proceed only when you can see that it is safe. You can't count on the other driver always obeying the rules.

Vehicle passing you

When another driver tries to pass you there are many possible collision courses. He or she may cut in sharply in front of you. You may decide to change lanes just as the other driver is trying to pass you on that side.

You may want to pull out of a parking space just as another vehicle is going by. Or perhaps you are making a left turn at an intersection, and another car has slipped in between you and the kerb.



Defence

1. Help out.

Protect yourself by allowing the other driver to pass. As you are being passed, check oncoming traffic. Then slow down if the passing car will need more room to get back into line in front of you. When turning right, signal and move to the proper lane early so that you can be overtaken on the left.

2. Check the rear.

Before you change lanes, check your rear view mirror and always glance back to make sure your blind spot is clear. Use your turn signals then move over only when the lane is clear.

3. Keep left.

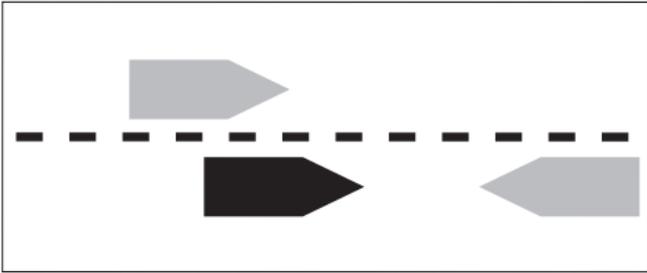
Get into the proper lane for a turn early. When turning left stay close to the left hand kerb to prevent anyone from passing on that side, watch out for small cars, bikes or scooters. Use your turn signals early.

4. Check, then move.

Don't nose out of a parking space to look for traffic. Take a good look before you move. Wait for a break in traffic, signal, then pull out promptly.

You overtake

You have attempted to pass another car on a two-lane road and suddenly find you can't make it. You risk a sideswipe if you cut back to the left too soon. Worst of all, you risk a head-on crash if you don't. Perhaps as you started to pass, the driver behind you had just started to pass you!



Defence

1. Be sure.

Know the speed and acceleration of your car, and estimate the speed of the vehicle you're trying to pass and the speed and distance of the oncoming car. These are matters of experience and judgment. A good passing rule: when in doubt, don't overtake!

2. Check the rear.

Never pull out to pass unless you are sure someone isn't trying to pass you at the same time. A quick look over the shoulder to check the blind spot is essential after checking the rear view mirror.

3. Get back in.

Return to your lane as soon as you clearly see the passed vehicle in your rear view mirror.

Intersection collisions

Wherever you go, others will cross your path. You are in danger whenever they do. One-half of all traffic accidents happen at intersections, and almost half the metropolitan traffic deaths occur there. Whenever you approach an intersection, avoid driving mistakes – yours, and those of other drivers.

You can if you:

1. Know
2. Slow
3. Show
4. Go

Remember your stopping distance

km/h	MINIMUM STOPPING DISTANCES IN METRES		
	AVERAGE REACTION TIME (0.75 SEC)	VEHICLE BRAKING DISTANCE	TOTAL
105	21	66	87
90	18	49	67
75	15	34	49
60	12	22	34
45	9	12	21
30	6	6	12

1. Know

Know that drivers sometimes do unexpected things at intersections – turn abruptly, often from the wrong lane, signal incorrectly or not at all, or screech to a sudden stop. So be alert.

Know your turns in advance so you can get in position early and slow gradually. Sudden last minute swerves cause pile-ups.

Know that traffic signs and signals can regulate traffic but they can't prevent accidents. Obey them, but be prepared to yield when other drivers do not. Be especially wary of unfamiliar control devices that permit you to move after you make a decision. Be sure your decision is safe.

Know the intersection rules, but, while you may have right of way, don't risk your neck on it. Some drivers forget and nobody wins a tie.

Know your stopping distance – a critical matter at intersections. The chart shows minimum stopping distances in good conditions. You need a lot of room to stop safely.

2. Slow

Slow down for intersections and be prepared to stop if necessary. Give yourself time to see trouble, not hit it.

Slow down gradually. Don't stop suddenly and trap the drivers behind you. Never speed up to beat a light. You might have to slam on the brakes – and cause a pile-up. On a slippery road avoid locking wheels (maximum braking occurs immediately before wheels lock). If wheels lock, release brakes momentarily then use pumping action to maintain traction between braking.

3. Show

Show others what you intend to do at intersections. If you are going to turn, signal early, get into the proper lane and use your turn signals at least 30 metres ahead of the intersection.

To turn left, get close to the left kerb to prevent anyone from passing you on that side. Watch out for small cars, bicycles or scooters coming up between you and the kerb. To turn right, get into position early and signal your intentions to allow following drivers to pass you on the left.

Don't try to beat oncoming traffic. It has the right of way unless a green arrow gives you priority.

4. Go

Go with caution through familiar intersections and usually empty residential streets.

Go easy when the light changes to green. Somebody in the cross traffic may try to beat the light. Don't follow another car too closely through the intersection – somebody you can't see (perhaps a pedestrian) may make the driver of the other car brake suddenly and you may run into it.

Go when you're sure!

Hesitation and overcaution at intersections can cause accidents by confusing other drivers.

What is the mystery crash?

And what causes it?

It's the one-car accident – the kind that involves a single vehicle in a traffic mishap.

Each year this type of accident results in one-third of the traffic deaths. Why call it the mystery crash? Because it's a real highway who-dunnit.

The deceased cannot fill out accident reports and those who do survive often won't admit their mistakes. And it's a mystery why it ever happened at all, since it's the one type of accident over which the driver has almost complete control. You can prevent the mystery crash from happening to you by learning its causes and avoiding them.

Is it the vehicle?

A vehicle in poor condition can be the cause of the mystery crash. Never operate a vehicle that has faulty brakes, steering or tyres. Your chances of staying out of an accident are much better when your vehicle is in top mechanical condition.

Regular check-ups keep it that way.

If a tyre blows, don't use the brakes. Hold the car wheels straight with a firm grip on the steering wheel. Ease up gently on the accelerator and when slowed down brake gently. Move to a safe spot, preferably off the road.

Check the following before and after every trip – and have any defects corrected immediately:

- ◆ Brakes
- ◆ Lights
- ◆ Steering
- ◆ Horn
- ◆ Tyres
- ◆ Wipers

Is it the road?

Unless you make allowances for the various road conditions you can be tricked into an accident.

Don't get thrown by a curve

1. Aim high in driving.

Look far down the road so you can see a curve coming up and slow down before you enter it.

2. Watch for road signs that warn of curves.

They tell the direction and degree of the curve and often suggest a safe speed.

3. Slow down before you reach the curve – not in it.

Once in it, don't coast but apply steady power and resume acceleration as you leave it.

Remember, too, that as many fatal accidents occur on straight roads as on curves – so be alert all the time.

Haven or hazard?

The roadside shoulder, a haven in emergency, can be treacherous if a wheel drops onto it at high speed. If it happens, don't panic. Instead of braking and trying to steer back onto the road while still going fast, slow down gradually to a safe speed, keeping the car on a straight course. Steer back onto the road slowly. An attempt to swerve back onto the road suddenly could throw your car out of control.

Safety sign posts

Be on the look out for road signs that warn of hazards – dips, narrow bridges, bumps, railroad tracks. Hitting any one of these at high speed can cause you to lose control – especially if you brake hard at the same time.

Is it the weather?

Driving in rain or snow, high wind, fog or smoke – all these conditions impose driving difficulties – and unless you can recognise how they can affect the control of a vehicle, they can cause you to have an accident.

You will have a better chance of weathering the storm if you:

1. Adjust your speed to the weather. Posted speed limits are for ideal conditions only. Slow down in rain, snow or patchy fog. Never overdrive your headlights. Don't pass blindly. Keep both hands on the wheel and be ready to stop at any time. Stalled vehicles, those with poor rear lights, slow moving farm machinery and animals can loom up suddenly in heavy rain or fog. In heavy fog, get completely off the road. Park on the shoulder well clear of the bitumen and leave parking lights on. In rest areas off the road, switch off lights.
2. Pump your brakes gently when stopping on slippery roads to avoid locked-wheel skids. Press and release them quickly once or twice a second. This gives alternate intervals of braking and steering control. If you do skid, steer in the direction the back of the vehicle is sliding.

3. Use snow tyres in snowy areas. Carry chains for emergencies.
4. Clean front and rear lights, check wipers, demister and brakes. Keep a working flashlight handy.

Is it another driver?

'I was cruising along when suddenly there's a car coming at me in my lane. I sounded my horn but the fellow kept on coming. I had to swerve and run off the road or he would have hit me head on'.

That's often the explanation for a last-second panic swerve to avoid a head-on collision – with serious results.

Drivers have crashed into telephone poles, or trees, or into parked cars, or run into ditches in such evasive action.

The cause of a mystery crash doesn't have to be coming at you. Another car can suddenly cut in front and run you off the road.

If you help the other driver out – you protect yourself. Check all traffic. Slow down immediately. Pull onto the shoulder if necessary. Sound your horn and flash your lights to warn other people.

Is it you? Keep in shape

All other driving hazards become many times worse if you are not at your physical and mental best. Drinking, drowsiness and illness slow your reflexes. Certain medicines can impair driving performance and so-called 'stay-awake' drugs can actually put you to sleep with your eyes open.

Remember, too, that heavy peak hour traffic, longer trips and later hours on weekends and holiday travel can all tire drivers and reduce their ability to handle a car. At the first sign of fatigue – droopy eyelids, stiff neck muscles, decreased awareness – pull over at a safe spot and stretch your legs. Take deep breaths. Get a cup of coffee if available. If you are still drowsy take a nap. Everyone has a limit to endurance.

Two hands for experts

Always drive with both hands on the wheel. Without a firm grip, it can be yanked from your grasp by a blowout, a hole or rock. By the time you have control again, you could be off the road. Hold the wheel firmly but not tensely.

If you have to check a map, fish coins from your pocket, shoo a bee, take off your jacket or do anything that takes both hands from the wheel, don't do it while moving. Pull over. Spend a little time and save your life.

Sharing the road

Pedestrians

No driver wants to be responsible for killing or injuring a pedestrian. It would be remembered with remorse and never forgotten. As drivers we must each do what we can to protect pedestrians. How can we avoid collisions with pedestrians? Actually there is no simple formula. Pedestrians can walk or run into the path of your car at almost any time of the day or night, and at any place, whether it is open highway or in a congested area of the city. Don't forget that pedestrians can have the right of way. Give them a fair go.

Be especially alert for the elderly: they are particularly susceptible to accident involvement because many of them have poor vision or defective hearing and cannot move quickly.

Children: Youngsters cannot be expected to remember and obey all the safety rules all the time regardless of how well they have been instructed in the home and school.

The drunk pedestrian: A major hazard. Actions are unpredictable and reflexes slow.

Cyclists

Collisions with bicycles represent another type of traffic accident. Cyclists are expected to obey the same traffic rules and regulations as drivers – such as keeping to the left, giving turn signals and obeying all traffic signs and signals. But most cyclists are children and they may not know or obey all these rules. So we must protect them by slowing down, tapping our horn and giving them plenty of room when we pass them. Watch out for cyclists riding at night.

Motor scooters and motor cycles can also be a problem, but remember, they are vehicles too, and they have a right to use the streets and highways also. Be on the alert for them by defensive driving.

Animals

Every year a number of motorists die as a result of a collision with, or swerving to avoid, an animal.

Be on the watch for animals, especially at night and particularly in unfenced bush country, or in farming areas. Keep your speed within the range of your headlights and if you see an animal ahead, slow down until you are safely past.

If an animal runs across in front of your vehicle, don't swerve but always aim to drive past behind the animal.

Reversing

Although reversing is a minor portion of vehicle movement, it can be especially hazardous. The driver's blind spot hampers awareness of anything in the path of the reversing vehicle. It is physically awkward to look back, but that is the only way you can be sure that children or pets haven't run behind your vehicle. The rules for reversing are:

1. Get the whole picture – even if you have to get out of your car and look.
2. Reverse slowly.
3. Check both sides as you reverse.
4. If you overshoot a pedestrian crossing, stay there. If you reverse, you might hit a pedestrian.
5. Wherever possible avoid reversing out of driveways into the traffic stream.

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