

# Driving Safety

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Driving safety has improved greatly over the decades thanks to numerous safety improvements in vehicles and better designed roads and traffic controls. Even so, more than 36,000 people died in auto accidents on U.S. roads in 2019 according to NHTSA data. The numbers are down a few thousand compared to previous years, but are still unacceptably high.

The fatality rate for 2019 was 1.10 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled. The fatalities include vehicle occupants (driver and/or passengers), motorcyclists, and pedestrians and bicyclists hit by cars. The sad fact is almost all of these fatalities could have been avoided. "Driver Error" is the primary cause, often compounded by additional factors :



## The most common causes of accidents include:

Drunk or Impaired Driving 36%

Speeding/Aggressive Driving 34%

Distracted Driving 18%

Bad weather 12%

Mechanical failures (brakes, tires, steering) 12%

**Note:** The percentages above add up to over 100% because some accidents involve more than one cause (such as speeding while drunk or impaired during bad weather)

## ARE SELF-DRIVING CARS THE ANSWER?

Engineers can make cars and roads safer, but as long as people are driving their own vehicles mistakes will be made and lives lost. Many of the newest [Active Safety Systems](#) and "Driver Assist" features such as Blind Spot Detection, Lane Departure Warning and Automatic Braking are intended to compensate or correct mistakes drivers often make. Fully autonomous vehicles that drive themselves with little or no human driver input are well along in their development and will become a reality within the next few years. The hope is that advanced self-driving cars will not make the same mistakes that humans do, and eliminate up to 90% or more of accidents and fatalities.

For more info on this subject, see [Self-Driving Cars](#)

## SAFE DRIVING TIPS

While we wait for self-driving cars to save humanity, here are some suggestions on how you can make driving much safer now:

**Buy a safe car.** Vehicles are given various safety rating by both government agencies and the insurance industry. When shopping for a new car, truck or SUV, check the safety rating. Most will have a 5-star rating (best), but may also have additional crash ratings such as rollover protection and offset frontal collision protection ratings. Choose one that has the best overall rating.

**Drive Smart!** Remember all the things they taught you in Drivers Education class?

**Don't follow the vehicle ahead too closely** so you have adequate room to stop if the vehicle ahead suddenly stops.

**Use your turn signal** when turning and changing lanes.

**Obey traffic signs and speed limits.**

**Drive defensively.** Never assume what another driver will do.

On divided highways, stay in the right lane except when passing.

**Never pass on a yellow line.**

**Adjust your inside and outside rear view mirrors before you drive,** and make sure you always check your blind spot before changing lanes.

**When parallel parking on a street, always check your side mirror** for oncoming vehicles, motorcyclists and bicyclists before you open your door.

**Move over to the left lane on a divided highway** if a vehicle is stopped or broken down on the side of the road. The same applies if a vehicle has been pulled over by the police.

**Slow down and allow more space between vehicles during bad weather.**

**Watch out for pedestrians when turning right on red** (after coming to a complete stop, of course, to avoid getting a Red Light Camera ticket!).

**When a traffic light turns green, look both ways before proceeding** through the intersection because another driver may be trying to beat a red light.

**When a traffic light turn yellow, use your brakes and slow down.** Don't hit the gas to try to beat the light.

**In rural areas, watch out for deer!** They are most active at dawn and dusk, and go totally nuts during rutting season in the fall.

**Watch for pedestrians and bicyclists** when driving in the city or suburbs, especially kids who can be very impulsive and unaware of oncoming vehicles.

**Watch for motorcycles**, especially those that come roaring up behind you and weaving in and out of traffic and driving between lanes. Yes, we need more organ donors but hopefully not from a cyclist that you didn't see.

**Don't be a distracted driver.** No texting while driving, no checking email, Twitter, Instagram or Facebook feeds, no watching cat videos on YouTube or clever dance skits on TikTok. Put the damn phone down and leave it down. You have more important things to do, like driving your vehicle.

Other distractions that may interfere with your ability to pay attention or react quickly to other vehicles around you include playing with the radio or climate controls, eating, drinking, smoking (or all at the same time!), having a heated conversation with another passenger in your car, or trying to settle a dispute between kids in the back seat. If you need to deal with a situation, find a safe place to pull off the road and take care of the situation. And keep your own cool while doing so.

**NEVER drive while impaired.** Don't drink and drive. Don't drive when buzzed, when high, or when taking prescription medications that may make you drowsy, cause your mind to drift or prevent you from reacting quickly to an emergency.

**Don't drive when fatigued.** Drivers who fall asleep often wake up in the hospital, or they don't wake up at all! There are laws that limit how many hours professional truck and bus drivers can drive before they are required to take a break and get some rest.

**Don't drive aggressively.** Expressway driving isn't NASCAR, although some drivers seem to think it is. Whipping back and forth to gain half a car length advantage in traffic is not only stupid, it is dangerous - especially if you are not using your turn signal to indicate your intentions to other drivers, or you misjudge the distance between vehicles.

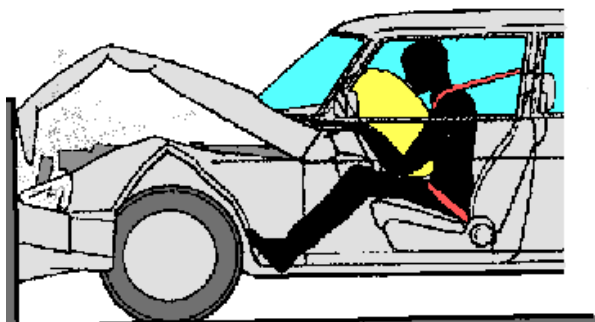
**Don't engage in Road Rage.** A lot of otherwise nice people become really impatient and hostile when they get behind the wheel of their vehicle. If another driver cuts them off, fails to show them courtesy or heaven forbid honks or gestures at them, they fly into a rage. Really? Is it worth it? Chill out and let it go. All too often, we hear of road rage incidents ending up with someone being run off the road, run over or shot. Don't be that person (or that victim!).

**A safe driver is a courteous driver.** Be that person who gives another driver a break when they are trying to change lanes or pull out into traffic from a parking lot or side street. If a driver behind you is riding your bumper like their pants are on fire, change lanes so they can get around you.

**Don't be in such a hurry** to get to where ever you are going. Enjoy the drive. Arrive alive.

**Chill out when driving in heavy traffic.** Listen to the Spa channel or relaxing music. Avoid listening to hostile or controversial radio talk shows when you are behind the wheel. Why? Because you can become mentally engaged in the discussion and express your anger or excitement in how you are driving.

## **SEAT BELTS, AIR BAGS AND PASSENGER SAFETY**



Make sure your passengers are safe. The car should not move until everybody is buckled up. Seat belts save lives. So do airbags but to do their job properly occupants also have to be buckled up.

**A caution about airbags:** Although the airbags in newer vehicles are "smarter" and deploy with adjustable force depending on the severity of a crash and the weight of an occupant, they do deploy with considerable force and may cause serious injury or even death if a driver is positioned too close to the steering wheel. This is especially important with smaller people who may scoot the seat up very close to the steering wheel so they can comfortably reach the pedals. Passenger side front airbags also present a potential danger to small children (usually those 8 or years younger) in an accident. For this reason, kids should NEVER be allowed to sit in the front passenger seat until they are old enough or large enough to comply with airbag precautions. Kids are always safer in the back seat regardless of age or size..

**Child seats:** Proper installation and use of child seats and booster seats is also extremely important for the safety of your children. Many cities offer a free inspection service where the police or fire department will check the installation of a child seat. Installing a child's car seat seems like a simple thing, but reports have shown that up to HALF of all car seats that parents have installed have not been installed correctly! Belts or mounting clips may have been improperly routed or not even fastened correctly. Infant seats must always be installed with the child facing backwards, never forwards. Simple mistakes can have tragic consequences so make sure child seats are installed correctly. Also, check for recalls. There have been countless recalls for various brands and models of car seats. If you own a seat that has been recalled, get rid of it. Put it in the trash. Don't give it away, resell it or donate it. Most resale shops no longer accept used child seats as donations because the liability risks are too great.

**Pet Safety:** The safety of your pets is important too. Nothing is more dangerous or distracting than an excited or upset dog jumping around inside a vehicle. Dogs love to hang their heads out an open window. Yes, it looks like fun until a bug or a rock hits them in the eye. Or they see another dog, or a cat or a squirrel and try to jump out the window!

Never drive with a pet sitting on your lap. They can interfere with your ability to steer or react quickly, and if your vehicle is in a crash and the airbag deploys it could severely injure or kill your beloved pet.

If a dog is not restrained with some type of safety harness or is not inside a securely mounted carrying cage, they can become a projectile in an accident. Dogs (and cats) were not meant to fly, especially into windshields, dash panels or seat backs. If you are taking a pet with you, make sure they are as safe as a human passenger.

## **MAKING SURE YOUR CAR IS SAFE TO DRIVE**

**Tires:** Many people don't know that tires weaken with age. Most tire manufacturers recommend replacing tires regardless of tread wear after six years, especially in hot climates. Heat, time, solar UV and ozone are all detrimental to the elasticity and strength of natural rubber. As a tire ages beyond six years, the risk of a sudden tire

failure doubles with each passing year. After 10 years, tire replacement should be mandatory. For more information, see [Why Tires Fail](#)

Heavily worn or bald tires are unsafe to drive on because they increase the risk of hydroplaning, skidding and loss of control. If the wear bars in the tread grooves are flush with the tread, your tires are worn out and should be replaced ASAP.

When you buy a set of replacement tires, don't buy the cheapest tires you can find. Look for tires that have an "A" temperature rating. "B" is acceptable but not as good as an "A" rated tire. A higher speed rating is also good because it indicates stronger materials and construction. See [Tire Replacement Tips](#)

**Proper tire inflation** is also important, especially when highway driving during hot weather. Underinflated tires are dangerous because they run hot and may suddenly blow out. If your vehicle has a Tire Pressure Monitor System (TPMS) and the TPMS warning light is on, don't ignore it. Check the air pressure in your tires and inflate to the recommended pressure as needed.



*Worn brake pads are dangerous!*

**Brakes:** Brake linings wear with use and eventually wear out. If your brake linings are worn down to minimum thickness, they need to be replaced. Worn brakes can increase the distance it takes your vehicle to stop. Most vehicles need new brake linings after 40,000 to 60,000 miles of average driving.

**Brake fluid leaks** are extremely dangerous because they can cause total brake failure! Check the fluid level, and if low inspect the brake system for fluid leaks. Leaks should be repaired without delay! If your Brake warning light is on, it may indicate a low fluid level and a leak.

**Steering & Suspension:** Tie rod ends, ball joint and control arm bushings also wear with miles driven. Worn steering or suspension parts can accelerate tire wear, and may make the steering feel loose or sloppy. Failure of a major steering or suspension component may cause you to lose steering control. If your vehicle has a lot of miles on it

and the steering or suspension does not feel normal or is making unusual noises, have it inspected and repaired as needed. See [How To Inspect Your Car's Suspension](#)

**Wipers:** Wipers should be replaced every two years, and may need to be replaced yearly in hot climates, especially if your vehicle is parked outdoors in direct sunlight. If your wipers are chattering, streaking, torn or doing a poor job, they need to be replaced now.

**Lights:** Make sure your headlights and taillights are working for safe night driving, and that your brake lights come on when you press on the brake pedal to alert drivers behind you that you are slowing or stopping. What's more, the cops may pull you over if you have a burned out light. That in itself can create a potentially dangerous situation if you are guilty of driving while black (or brown).

## OTHER THREATS TO YOUR SAFETY WHEN YOU ARE IN YOUR VEHICLE



**Watch out for Car Jackers!** It's a sad commentary on our society today, but car jacking has become a common occurrence in many large cities and even the suburbs. Factory anti-theft systems have made it nearly impossible to "hot wire" (bypass the ignition switch) in late model vehicles, so criminals have had to turn to car jacking. They stick a gun in your face, demand your vehicle (and maybe your cell phone and wallet too) and take what they want.

If this happens to you, don't resist. Don't argue or plead with the car jacker, don't try to fight them or grab their gun. And if you pack your own heat (conceal carry), do you really want to risk a shoot out with someone who may be high on drugs or wouldn't hesitate to shoot you first? Your car isn't worth your life.

Most vehicles that are car jacked are stolen for one of two reasons: to commit another crime (such as a drive-by shooting, robbery or break-in), or for resale outside the U.S. Vehicles that are car jacked for resale are usually expensive high end luxury or performance vehicles. But driving a clunker is no protection against car jacking because a thug who needs a vehicle to commit another crime doesn't care what kind of vehicle it is. He will take your 12 year old minivan with 250K miles on the odometer.

The scary thing is a car jacking can happen almost anywhere, but typically occur when someone is refueling their car, or when they are getting into or out of a parked vehicle. Car jacking happens in parking lots, parking ramps, on the street or even on the road. "Bump and Steal" is another tactic a car jacker will use to trick you into stopping and getting out of your vehicle. The car jacker follows you in another vehicle, then bumps you at a stop light or stop sign from behind. When you get out to inspect the damage, they steal your car.

### **Related Articles:**

[Defensive Driving Tips](#)

[Distracted Driving](#)

[Drunk Driving](#)

[Mechanical Causes of Auto Accidents](#)

[Safe Travel Tips](#)

### **AUTO SAFETY RESOURCES:**

[NHTSA](#) (tons of facts & figures)

[NSC.Org](#)

[Carsafe.org](#) (Child seat info)