

Key Risk

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SafetyConnection

Driving Safety - Is It Important to YOU?

Driving is part of our routine, and something to which we give little thought. Many of us get in the car and head to our destination at speeds in excess of 70 miles per hour, with our minds more focused on the upcoming activities of the day than the road ahead. We often have our coffee and breakfast en route to work thinking about how the 9:00 AM meeting will go; do I have everything I need for today; what do I need to do after work? Stop for a moment – should we really think of driving as a routine task?

The most recent statistics available from the National Safety Council are staggering. In 2006, which is the most recent year for which statistics are available, there were 252 million registered vehicles in the United States and 44,700 fatalities. For every one million miles traveled, 1.49 people were killed. An additional 2.4 million people suffered disabling injuries, and the cost of those crashes is estimated to be in excess of \$258 billion. This is not a new problem; the 2006 statistics represent a very minor (2%) improvement over 2005, which was previously the best year on record. With these statistics in mind, are you doing your part to operate your vehicle safely?

Conduct an honest assessment of your driving habits. Each of us can improve this routine task of our lives. Drive defensively. Drive safely. You are worth it! The better outcomes obtained by using these defensive driving strategies are worth it too. Don't become a statistic!



How can you become a defensive, safe driver?

DELIVERING BETTER OUTCOMES THROUGH SAFETY AWARENESS

Below are some strategies to help you avoid becoming a sobering statistic.

- 1. Wear your seatbelt!** Such a simple thing to do, and yet only 81% of Americans use this vital safety equipment. Every state in the country (except New Hampshire) has mandatory seat belt laws. When used properly, the risk of fatal injury to front seat occupants (driver and passengers) is reduced by 45%. The risk of moderate-to-critical injury is reduced by 50%. Don't forget children either – child restraints have been required in all states since 1986. The safest place for children is buckled up in the back seat. Child restraint systems should be age, height and weight appropriate. Any kind of personal protective equipment (which includes child restraint systems) should be replaced if it is involved in a serious accident, or is more than five years old. Remember, children learn by watching adults; they will mirror your behavior. If you buckle up, odds are they will too when they are old enough to do so.
- 2. Air bags save lives.** When combined with lap/shoulder belts, air bags offer the best protection available for passenger vehicle occupants. They are specifically designed to be used in conjunction with lap/shoulder belts, and only activate in moderate-to-severe frontal crashes. Children in rear-facing child seats should not be allowed to sit in the front seat of vehicles with air bags, as the impact of the air bag could cause serious injury or death. In some states it is against the law to allow children to sit in the front seat in vehicles that are equipped with a back seat.
- 3. Slow down.** There is no disputing the numbers. Excessive speed was a factor in 31% of all traffic fatalities in 2006. This is not a new trend. The number of crashes attributed to speeding has not changed significantly in the past decade. Nearly half of speeding-related fatalities occurred on roads with speed limits of 55 miles per hour or more; 90% occurred on roads not designated as interstates. Statistically speaking, every ten miles per hour over 50 you travel, regardless of the speed limit, doubles your chance of death in an accident. Simply stated, the faster you travel the more time it takes to stop AND maintain control of your vehicle. Make sure you allow enough time to reach your destination safely. If you leave late, be prepared to arrive late. It is nearly impossible to make up time on a routine short trip. A little effort to set reasonable time lines and develop patience might save your life.
- 4. Guard against distractions.** Inattention to driving accounts for 78% of crashes and an estimated 65% of near misses. One of the biggest distractions is, of course, the use of cell phones. With the advent of affordable cell phones came a dramatic increase in the number of drivers who own them. None of

us can dispute that cell phone use and text messaging is distracting. In fact, National Safety Council research has shown that talking on a cell phone is equivalent to driving while impaired, as measured by a .08 blood alcohol content. There is little change in the statistic with a hands-free device. The problem is between your ears. It is nearly impossible to pay attention to everything you need to watch while driving a car AND talking on a cell phone. Text messaging may be worse. Let that call go to voice mail. Wait until you stop to make calls on your cell phone. Is it really worth it to gamble with your life over a telephone call? Other secondary task engagements, such as reading maps or other documents, mentally preparing for that 9:00 AM meeting, eating and drinking, fatigue, and inattention to the roadway (looking in the rear view mirror too long rather than watching what is coming up on the roadway) can be equally dangerous.

- 5. Don't drink and drive.** It is so simple, yet 41% of traffic fatalities involve one or more intoxicated driver. One alcohol-related fatality occurs every 30 minutes. This may be the easiest decision you ever have to make. Don't ever drive a car after you have had even one alcoholic beverage. The human body is a complicated device, and each of us responds to alcohol differently. It is difficult to gauge exactly when a person is legally intoxicated without a blood or saliva test. Every state in this country sets a blood alcohol content of .08 as the definitive measure of intoxication. However, you can be convicted of driving while impaired with blood alcohol content below the legal limit if your actions or driving behavior gives the appearance of impairment. This is often documented with camera footage from a patrol car. Many factors go into impairment, including your overall health, metabolism, height, weight, body fat, the amount of time that has transpired since you started drinking, food intake, and medications you might be using. If you plan to drink alcohol and must travel, some safe options include:

- Designate a completely sober driver
- Call a taxi
- Use public transportation

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