

Are you a pretty good driver?

Most people think they are. Much of what a person does while driving is second nature. Yet a single lapse of judgment can cause a dangerous situation for driver and passengers. That's why it's smart to review some basic safe-driving practices that could be useful everyday.

Before starting out

- Make sure you and everyone else who rides in your car wears a safety belt. Unrestrained occupants involved in fatal crashes are twice as likely to die as restrained occupants. Even professional racing drivers say being belted is the most important factor in controlling a car in an accident situation.
- If young children are riding in the car, make sure they have the proper safety seats or booster seats.
- Have regular preventive maintenance performed on your car. Breakdowns on the road can cause traffic problems and lead to dangerous situations.

While driving

- Follow the two-second rule. This rule provides the minimum distance you should maintain between your car and the car in front of you when traveling at any speed. To compute the distance, pick out a fixed object by the side of the road. As the car in front of you passes it, count off two seconds. That's the minimum time it should take for you to pass that same object and maintain a safe driving distance.
- Adjust your speed and following distances for driving at night, in inclement weather and on bad roads. That means you might have to increase the two-second rule to three seconds or more.
- Driving demands full attention, so avoid distractions. One of the biggest distractions today is cell phones. Most of us have seen instances of drivers concentrating on cell phone conversations and not paying attention to their driving. Use a cell phone in your car for emergency situations only, and pull safely over to the side of the road before you dial.
- Avoid arguments or other emotionally draining situations. Don't storm into your car after a heated argument. Wait until after you've regained your composure. If you feel tempers rising in the car, postpone the confrontation until you can get out of the car and before your emotions interfere with sound driving decisions.
- Avoid driving when you're fatigued, especially at night. Before you realize it, you could be nodding off with potentially disastrous results. That's why it's important to take

breaks. Get fresh air. Turn up the radio. Chew gum. Engage in a conversation with your passengers. If you still feel even a little drowsy, it might be best to pull completely off the road, find a safe spot to park and get some rest.

- If your car has broken down on the road, indicate so by displaying a white cloth on the antenna or door, opening the hood and putting on your flashers. Make sure you get your car well off the roadway, away from the flow of traffic. Carry flares, emergency triangles or other emergency warning devices.

When you've reached your destination

- When leaving your car, make sure to place it in park and set the parking brake. If your car has a manual transmission, put it in first gear and set the hand brake. If parked on a hill, be sure to turn your wheels away from the curb if your car is pointed uphill, and toward the curb if pointed downhill.
- At night, park your car in areas that are well lighted, and check out the area when you leave and return.
- Make sure your car doors are locked when you park, even if you're only leaving the vehicle for a few minutes.
- When you pull up to a store, a bank or to pick someone up, never leave your car engine running — no matter how short the stop. Each year, thousands of cars are reported stolen this way.

Drive defensively

- Avoid confrontations with other drivers.
- NEVER retaliate when another driver does something you don't like. Cutting in front of a driver after he's cut in front of you can only make a bad situation worse.
- NEVER flash obscene gestures at other drivers.
- NEVER tailgate, flash your lights or honk your horn to make other drivers go faster.
- Maintain space before you and behind you. If the car behind you is trailing too closely, change lanes and let it pass.
- Use directional signals for all turns and lane changes.
- Anticipate potential safety problems. Be aware of what's happening several cars ahead of you, behind you and to your sides.
- Check your mirrors often.
- Maintain speed limits. Driving too slowly can be just as dangerous as driving too fast.
- Drive with both hands on the steering wheel.

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Everyday Driving Tips