

DEFY DEFENSIVE

Defensive driving is about reducing risk and saving lives — yours and the lives of drivers around you.

By Debbie Feldman

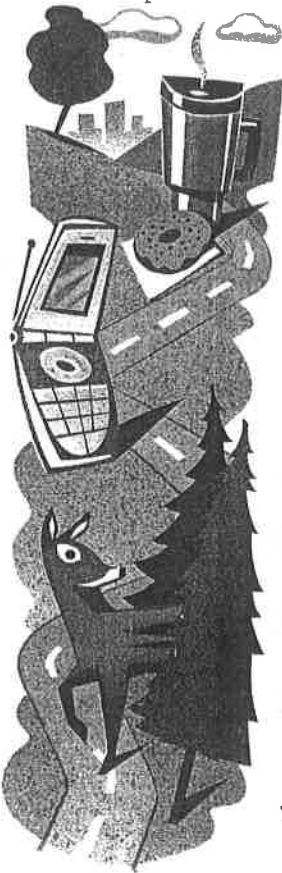


Illustrations: minkybraun.com

LAST FALL, CHRISTINE BUSH of Center Valley, Pa., was driving on a four-lane suburban highway in heavy rain when she suddenly came upon water that covered all four lanes.

“I didn’t see the water until I was in it,” she explains. “The road ahead of me seemed to disappear. It seemed like there was water as far as I could see. I almost lost control of my car.”

Flash floods are just one of the hazardous situations drivers face. “Never drive on a roadway covered with water — either standing or moving,” says James Solomon, program director of the Driver and Roadway Safety Department for the National Safety Council (NSC). “You don’t know how deep the water is or whether the surface of the road has been compromised or damaged by the water.” Even a small amount of water can force your car off the road surface and cause you to lose control.



Oh, Behave!

Be a defensive driver, but also monitor your own habits behind the wheel. In 2007, these driving behaviors were cited as causing fatal vehicle and motorcycle crashes.

Driving Behavior	Percent of crashes involved*
Failure to stay in proper lane or running off the road	28.0
Driving too fast for conditions, in excess of posted speed limit or racing	21.5
Driving under the influence of alcohol, drugs or medications	13.6
Inattentive driving — talking, eating, etc.	8.4
Failure to yield right-of-way	7.2
Over-correcting/over-steering	4.4
Failure to obey traffic signs, signals or officer	4.4
Swerving due to weather, road conditions or obstacles	3.8
Operating vehicle in erratic, reckless, careless or negligent manner	3.3
Making improper turn	2.9
Obscured vision due to rain, snow, glare, lights, building, trees, etc.	2.7
Drowsy, fatigued, asleep, ill or blacked-out while driving	2.5
Driving wrong way on one-way street or on wrong side of the road	1.2
Other factors/no cause reported/unknown	52.2

Source: The Insurance Information Institute, using 2007 statistics from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.
*Percentages total more than 100 because more than one factor may be present for the same driver.

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Many other situations on the road pose danger, but there are ways to reduce your risk.

DON'T SPEED

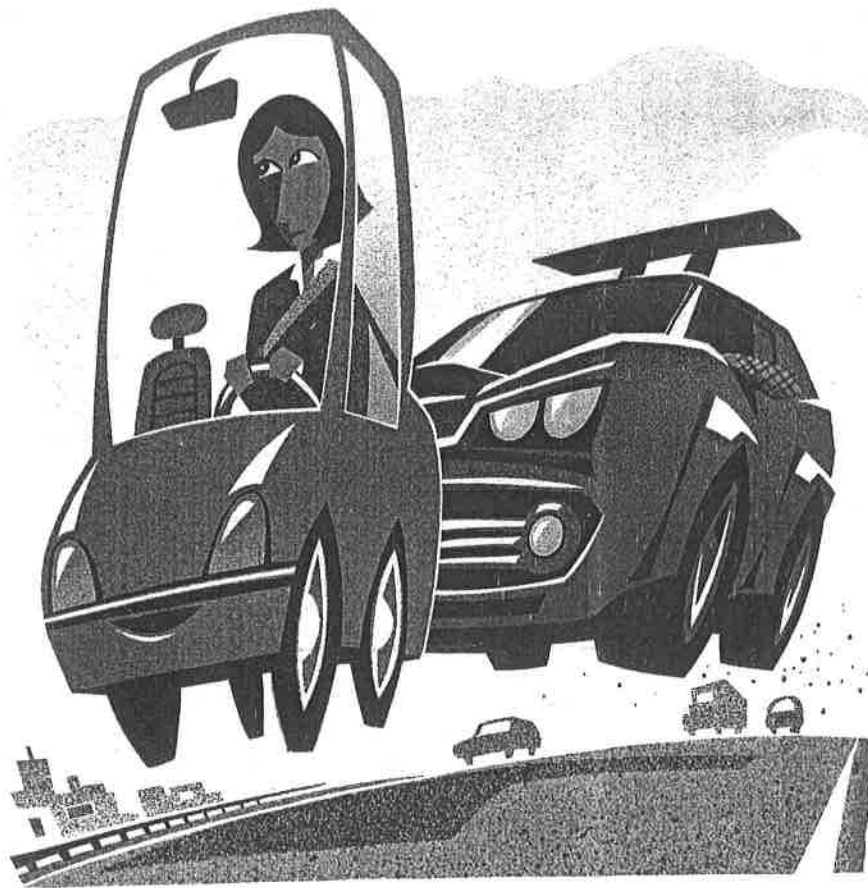
According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), speeding is a factor in about one-third of all fatal crashes, which kill more than 1,000 Americans every month. In 2006, more than 13,500 people died in fatal crashes.

The faster you drive, the more likely you are to die if you're involved in a crash. "Your vehicle's safety features and devices, such as air bags and safety belts, are designed to protect you in the event of a collision at speeds under 50 mph," Solomon says. "But at higher speeds, the force of the collision is more dangerous to your body." Between 50 and 60 mph, your risk of death from a collision is double what it

is at less than 50 mph. At 70 mph, the risk of death doubles again. At 80 mph, it doubles again, and at 90 mph, it doubles yet again.

OBEY THE THREE-SECOND RULE

Always leave plenty of room between you and the vehicle in front of you. The NSC recommends that you follow the three-second rule, which provides a cushion of space between your car and the one in front of you. When that vehicle's rear bumper passes a stationary object, such as a road sign, tree or telephone pole, begin counting "one-thousand-and-one, one-thousand-and-two, one-thousand-and-three." You should be able to finish counting before your front bumper crosses that same point. "Add another second for each deteriorating road condition, like snow, rain, ice or fog," Solomon says.



BEWARE OF TAILGATERS

When someone tailgates you, they're putting you at risk. The worst thing you can do is contribute to the situation. "Tailgating is aggressive driving," Solomon says. Don't tap the brakes or flash your lights. Doing so might make the tailgater angry, and he or she might pass you and cut you off, or worse. Instead, let the car pass you, increase your following distance and steer clear. The tailgater is likely to tailgate the vehicle in front of you. If that driver reacts by braking quickly, you'll need extra stopping distance.

DRIVE IN THE PROPER LANE

When driving on the freeway, the left lane is for passing. If you're in the left lane traveling the speed limit and cars behind you want to pass, move to the right and let them. If you don't, they'll pass you on the right and possibly cut

back in front of you, increasing the chances of an accident.

"Remember, on the freeway it's about survival, it's not a contest; let them go," Solomon advises. "Your job is not to be the police or to teach others how to drive."

Also try to avoid stopping on the left shoulder in emergency situations. "You're only inches away from the left lane and the fastest-moving cars on the road," Solomon warns. Instead, try to move to the right, pulling off to the right shoulder as far away from traffic as possible.

DON'T GET DISTRACTED

A distraction is anything that diverts your attention from the road, which can include eating, reaching for something, smoking, adjusting an iPod or putting in a CD. According to the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, inatten-

Travel Info Options

- Global positioning systems (GPS) provide you with mapping and traffic information. Before choosing a system, check on how frequently information is updated. Some companies allow users to contribute updates.
- Local radio stations — especially the drive-time shows — are another option. Call the non-emergency phone number at the local police station to find out where to tune.
- Dial 511 to access the Federal Communications Commission's nationwide traveler information network. Not all states have access to the system, but an estimated 70 percent of the country's population will have access by the end of 2009.
- Do an online search for your state's transportation department to find local numbers and links. Or go to www.fhwa.dot.gov/Trafficinfo/ to access the Federal Highway Administration's "National Traffic and Road Closure Information" page, as well as additional state information.
Be sure to check all info before you leave, or pull over to the side of the road so you're not distracted while driving.

Rural Road Realities

Even though small-town and country roads may have less traffic, they're not any less dangerous to travel. In fact, they can be more dangerous. Lack of adequate lighting and intersection markings, limited visibility and intermittent pavement markings can affect your ability to drive safely.

Narrower lanes also can create problems — especially for tired drivers. After a few hours on the road, some drivers can "drift" as much as a foot in either direction. While freeway lanes generally are wide, rural roads aren't so forgiving, so take frequent breaks.

THE FARM FACTOR

Rural roads also service farmers, so watch for slow-moving vehicles, like those carrying animals. Even though they're usually marked "slow-moving," hazards still are present. For example, you can't see turn signals when flashers are working. Don't assume drivers will use hand signals, and never pass a slow-moving vehicle with its lights flashing. It may turn into you.

ANIMALS ABOUND

Animals on the roadway are another problem on rural roads. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety reports that more than 10,000 Americans are injured and about 120 are killed each year in vehicle collisions with animals.

Drivers collide with deer more than any other animal. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) estimates that 1.5 million deer/vehicle crashes occur each year in the U.S.

When traveling on rural roads, pay attention to deer crossing signs — being especially wary at dawn and dusk. Deer also move in groups so if you see one, you're likely to see more. Don't rely on warning devices such as deer whistles, and always wear your safety belt. That's the best way to protect yourself against injury or death in an animal/vehicle collision, according to the IIHS.



tive driving is a factor in more than 1 million crashes in North America every year, and drivers are doing something potentially distracting more than 15 percent of the time.

Cell phone use is one of the biggest driving distractions. If you need to make or take a call or text a message, pull off the road. Better yet, turn off your cell phone while you drive so you won't be tempted to answer calls. "Using a cell phone while driving is the equivalent, in terms of mental impairment, of a blood-alcohol level of .08," Solomon says. "And if you're texting while driving, you're as mentally impaired as if you were on cocaine."

Kids and animals also can create a distraction — especially if not properly restrained. Change the baby, feed the kids and buckle them in before you leave, advises the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. And never shave, put on makeup, feed a baby, read or do anything else that diverts your attention from driving when you're behind the wheel.

"Remember, you're in a vehicle moving through time," Solomon warns. At 30 mph, you're moving 44 feet per second; at 45 mph, you're moving 66 feet per second; and at 65 mph, you're moving 95.3 feet per second. "Anything that

takes even a second to do impairs your attention to the road."

WHAT ABOUT...

- If you approach an intersection and the power is out and stoplights aren't working?

Stop. Look both ways and then proceed with caution. "It's a universal rule that when traffic signals fail, the intersection automatically becomes a four-way stop," Solomon says.

- If you're in the middle of traffic, at a standstill, and an emergency vehicle is approaching?

"You must move to the right to give the emergency vehicle egress," Solomon says. "If you cannot move to the right, then don't move at all, or move to the right-hand portion of your lane." Allow the vehicle to pass you if you can.

No matter where you are, or whatever the situation, always drive defensively. "Defensive driving is driving to save lives, time and money in spite of the conditions around you and the actions of others," Solomon says. Wear your safety belt, obey traffic rules, follow the three-second rule and don't drive under the influence. You'll help improve road safety wherever you're traveling. 🍀