

Night Driving

1. Driver factors.

Vision, glare, and fatigue are the three major factors that affect night driving.

Vision. At night, visual acuity is reduced, side vision is poorer, and the eyes have a difficult time adjusting from light to darkness.

Glare. Bright light can temporarily blind a driver. Recovery rates vary from one half to two seconds. At 55 mph a vehicle covers about 150 feet in two seconds. Drivers should avoid looking directly into bright lights by looking toward the right side of the road when bright lights approach.

Fatigue. Fatigue is a factor when it comes to safe driving; especially at night. A 1995 National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) study showed that 74 percent of accidents occurring between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m. were fatigue related. Fatigue can reduce driver reaction time to hazards and cause blurred vision.

2. Roadway factors.

Poor lighting, drunk drivers, and animals are roadway hazards drivers face at night.

Poor lighting. At night, hazards aren't as easy to see as during daylight hours. In rural areas drivers need to depend on their headlights for lighting. In urban areas lighting levels can vary. Since levels vary, a driver's eyes are required to adjust to different levels of lighting. Drivers should slow down and use extra caution on unfamiliar roads, making sure there is enough stopping distance.

Drunk drivers. Drunk drivers are a hazard to everyone on the road. Extra caution should be used around closing times for bars and taverns. Drivers need to keep an eye out for vehicles that weave from lane to lane, stop without reason, have trouble maintaining a constant speed, or show other signs of impaired or erratic driving.

Animals. Drivers need to pay special attention to roadways that are lined by woods and/or tall grass. Deer, raccoons, and other animals are often on the move at night and can dart into the roadway.

3. Vehicle factors.

Improperly functioning lights, dirty windshields, and dirty mirrors can all pose problems for drivers at night.

Headlights. At night, headlights are the main way to see and be seen on the highway. In good weather, low beams allow a driver to see about 250 feet and high beams about 350 to 500 feet. Speed may need to be adjusted so the vehicle can be stopped within the range of the headlights. Drivers should always drive within the range of the headlights. Driving outside the range of the headlights can adversely affect visibility. Headlights should be clean and in proper adjustment. Dirty or poorly adjusted headlights can cut illumination by as much as one half.

Other lights. Marker lights, reflectors, clearance lights, taillights, and identification lights must also be clean and working properly.

Windshields and mirrors. A clean windshield and mirrors are very important at night. Bright lights hitting dirt on a windshield or mirror can create a glare. Dirt on the windshield can also cause problems if driving into a sunrise or sunset.

4. Night driving tips.

There are several simple safety tips drivers should follow when driving at night.

Watch speed. Under certain driving conditions the speed limit may not allow enough time to spot and react to hazards.

Drive defensively. Drivers need to be aware of shadows and unclear images in lighted areas. They need to anticipate potential accident situations. A driver's line of vision should constantly shift from left to right, front to back. Drivers should watch for animals and vehicles darting into the roadway or any other clues the highway ahead may provide about possible hazards. Use caution when rounding curves. When rounding a curve, headlights shine straight ahead (off the road) reducing vision. Reducing vehicle speed is the best way to deal with curves. Don't stare at a single point. This can distract a driver causing highway hypnosis.