

Special Driving Situations

Only practice and experience can make you a good driver. Almost 40 percent of highway crashes involve drivers under 25 years old, and most of these crashes are due to driver inexperience. To become a good driver, you must follow several rules:

- Give driving your full attention. Don't let yourself be distracted while moving. Talking to passengers, adjusting a car stereo, or eating can all be dangerous distractions.
- Drive defensively, and keep your eyes on the road ahead. By staying alert, you will be able to see possible hazards and have time to avoid them.
- Learn how to drive in different situations. Practice highway driving, night driving, and handling a motor vehicle in various weather conditions.
- Know how to handle emergency driving situations, such as skidding or tire blowout.
- Know, understand, and obey the rules of the road.

This chapter explains what defensive driving means and how to tackle special driving situations. It also offers a few more rules of the road, such as what you must do in the event of a motor vehicle accident, even if you are only a witness.



CHAPTER 5

Your Health and Physical Condition

Because you must be in control of your vehicle at all times, it is important that you remain alert and responsive. You not only need good vision, you need good hearing as well. There are certain situations in which you should never drive:

- When you have been drinking alcohol
- When you have taken any prescription or over-the-counter medication that can cause drowsiness
- If you are under the influence of any drug
- When you are very tired
- When you are emotionally upset. Emotional states like anger and depression can cause you to drive carelessly.

Checking Your Vehicle's Condition

The law requires you to have your passenger vehicle or motorcycle inspected for safety and emissions every year (see *Chapter Six*). However, you should always follow the routine maintenance procedures recommended by your vehicle manufacturer. Each time before you enter your vehicle or mount your motorcycle, make a quick visual check for low tire pressure or any damage you may not have noticed before.

Brakes and Tires

Pay close attention to changes in how your vehicle responds when braking. If you think you have a problem, have your brakes inspected immediately. If you feel the vehicle pull to one side when you brake, your brakes may need adjustment or repair.

Check your tires for proper inflation and wear. Rotate your tires as often as recommended by the vehicle or tire manufacturer. It is dangerous and illegal to drive a vehicle with extremely worn or damaged tires. Tires must have at least $2/32$ inches of tread depth in the proper grooves and no fabric breaks or exposed cords.

The distance between the edge of a penny and the top of Lincoln's head is about $2/32$ of an inch. A quick way to check your tire tread is to slide a penny into a tread groove. If you can see Lincoln's head, your tires are worn out.

Steering

Your steering wheel should not feel so loose that you notice a delay between when you turn the wheel and your tires respond. With power steering, you should check the fluid level regularly. If your vehicle makes a high-pitched noise when you turn, you should have your power steering inspected.

Lights and Glass

Make sure to check your headlights, brake lights, and turn signals periodically. Keep your lights clear of dirt, snow, and ice. Keep your windows and mirrors clean. Change your windshield wipers if they streak or fail to clear your windshield properly.

Moving Emergency Vehicle

- You must always yield the right-of-way to fire engines, ambulances, police cars, and other emergency vehicles when those vehicles are using a siren and/or emergency flashing lights.
- If you see or hear an emergency vehicle coming from any direction, you must pull as close as possible to the right side of the road and stop until the vehicle has passed. Slowly rolling is not acceptable.
- Check your mirrors and find a safe place to pull over to the right. You should not pull your vehicle to the left or slam on your brakes and stop suddenly. Use your right turn signal to let those driving behind you know what you plan to do.
- NEVER stop in the middle of an intersection. Continue driving through an intersection and pull over as soon as it is safe to do so.
- After the emergency vehicle has passed, use your left turn signal and make sure the lane is clear before merging into traffic. Be sure that there are no other emergency vehicles approaching before you enter traffic.
- It is illegal to follow closer than 300 feet behind an emergency vehicle responding to an alarm.

Stationary Emergency Vehicle

- As a driver, you need to slow down and stay alert whenever you see an “emergency response vehicle” stopped ahead of you with its emergency lights flashing. These vehicles include fire trucks, police cars, ambulances, and “disaster vehicles” (usually in support of other emergency vehicles and services). You must do the same when the stopped vehicle ahead is a highway maintenance vehicle or recovery vehicle (tow truck, ramp truck, etc.) and is displaying flashing emergency lights. You must exercise caution for the safety of yourself and others.
- The new “move-over law” (Chapter 418 of the Acts of 2008) requires that if you are approaching a stationary vehicle described above and it is displaying its flashing lights, you must proceed with caution and reduce your speed to that of a reasonable and safe speed for the road conditions. If you are on a highway with at least four lanes (at least two of which allow travel in the same direction you are heading), yield the right-of way by safely “moving over” to a lane that is not next to the lane the emergency, highway, or recovery vehicle is occupying. In other words, leave an open lane between your vehicle and the stopped emergency vehicle. If “moving-over” is impracticable, you must still proceed with caution and reduce your speed to that of a reasonable and safe speed for the road conditions.
- Always be prepared to stop if necessary when passing an emergency vehicle.
- If approaching at nighttime, be sure to dim your high beams.
- If you need help, pull in front of the police cruiser and ask for assistance. Never stop behind a police cruiser. *(Do not attempt to approach a police officer who appears to be*

dealing with a stopped motorist. Stand next to your vehicle on the shoulder until the police officer is finished.)

- It is illegal to drive by or park within 800 feet of a fire. You are not allowed to drive over an unprotected fire hose unless directed to do so by a firefighter or public safety official.

General Guidelines if You Are Stopped by a Police Officer

State law requires you to pull over to the right side of the road and stop when signaled to do so by a police officer-whether the officer is in a police car or on foot. Being pulled over may cause anxiety for both you and the police officer. Your anxiety may be caused by the fear of getting a ticket or because you are not sure why you are being stopped. Police officers rarely know what to expect from a driver or his or her passengers during a traffic stop and are likely to be anxious about their own personal safety.

As a driver, you should understand that the way you act during the traffic stop may well determine the police officer's reaction. Becoming argumentative, disregarding the officer's instructions or requests, suggesting that the officer could be more productive by stopping other drivers, or allowing yourself or your passengers to suddenly reach under the seat or into unseen areas of the passenger compartment are not appropriate reactions during a traffic stop and may increase the officer's own anxiety.

Traffic law enforcement is one of the most important duties that police officers perform. Their efforts are aimed at helping to ensure the orderly flow of traffic and to help prevent deaths and injuries on our public roads. There is an obvious need for a constant enforcement effort. More persons are killed and injured in motor vehicle traffic crashes across the U.S. each year than are killed and injured in all other forms of violence combined. In 2007 (the last year for which figures are available), 41,259 persons (drivers, passengers, pedestrians and cyclists) were killed and over 2,491,000 were injured in the U.S. as the result of motor vehicle traffic crashes (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration-NHTSA). Locally, in 2007, Massachusetts recorded 434 deaths and 50,065 injuries from motor vehicle traffic crashes (RMV Crash Data Department).

Statistics show that police officers have reason to be concerned about their personal safety while performing traffic enforcement duties. Each year in the United States a number of police officers are killed and thousands more are assaulted in the performance of traffic law enforcement duties. During 2007 alone, 11 police officers were killed and 6,424 others were assaulted as a result of traffic pursuits and stops (Federal Bureau of Investigation-Uniform Crime Reports).

You can help reduce the levels of anxiety during a traffic stop, both your own and the officer's, and help to lessen the chance of that stop unnecessarily erupting into something more serious, by reading and following these common-sense guidelines. The Registrar strongly urges you to do so.

- Do not ignore the officer's signal by pretending you didn't see it or by assuming it wasn't meant for you.
- Turn on your right-turn signal to let the officer know you intend to stop and carefully move your vehicle completely to the right side of the road after checking your mirrors. If the officer continues on by without ordering you to stop, you can return to the flow of traffic when it is safe to do so.
- Gradually slow the vehicle and bring it to a safe stop by the right side of the road or wherever the officer directs you (not in an intersection, or in front of a driveway or in a travel lane).
- Put the car in park (if an automatic transmission) or in neutral with the parking brake on (if a standard transmission) and turn off the engine.
- Both you and your passengers should stay in the vehicle unless you are instructed to get out by the officer.
- If it is after dark, leave your headlights on and put the interior overhead light on.
- Roll down the driver's window as the officer approaches.
- Wait to be instructed by the officer to produce your license and registration, but have them ready, and **do not** present them to the officer in a wallet or in a holder. (You are required by law to have your license and registration when operating a vehicle.)
- Make sure that your hands are in plain sight and tell your passengers to do the same.
- Neither you nor your passengers should make any sudden movements or gestures that could be construed as threatening by the officer, such as reaching under the seats or reaching into any other unlit areas of the vehicle.
- Stay in your vehicle when the officer goes back to the police car. If you have a question to ask at that point you should remain in your vehicle until the officer returns. If you are able to find any documents the officer previously requested, hold them out the window so he or she can see you have them and wait until the officer returns.
- Accept the return of your paperwork politely. If the officer issues a citation to you, do not attempt to argue your case or to persuade the officer to change or rescind it. Once a citation is issued, the police officer is required to file the appropriate copies with his or her superior officer. You have the right to challenge the issuance of the citation in court, if you choose to do so.
- When the officer tells you that you may go, put on your left-turn signal, check your mirrors prior to re-entering traffic and, if on a divided highway, accelerate to a safe speed while in the breakdown lane before merging into traffic.

Remember, a police officer never knows what to expect when stopping a driver—even if the stop is unrelated to a motor vehicle violation. Don't let your emotions or sudden unexplained movements (or those of your passengers) introduce a higher degree of tension or anxiety into the traffic stop. A police officer may be more likely to listen to you and less likely to feel threatened by you (or your passengers) if you follow these simple guidelines.

IMPORTANT: If you believe that you were stopped by a police officer because of your race or your gender, you may report the incident by contacting the police department or law enforcement agency of the officer who made the stop.

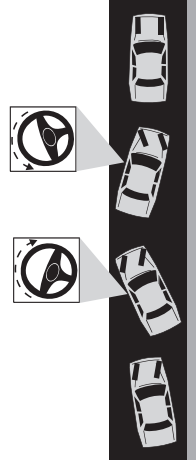
Driving Emergencies

In any emergency driving situation, it is very important that you think clearly and don't panic. In most emergency situations, you have only a short time to react. Read this section to learn what to do when an emergency occurs. It could save a life.

Skidding

The technique for handling a skid is the same for front- and rear-wheel drive vehicles:

- Ease off the gas, and shift into neutral.
- Don't hit the brakes. You will make the skid worse.
- Turn your steering wheel **in the direction of the skid**. If your rear tires are skidding to the left, turn your steering wheel left. If they are sliding right, steer right.
- Be prepared to steer left and right a few times until you get your car completely under control.



If your vehicle skids, always turn your steering wheel in the direction of the skid.

Running Off the Pavement

If you drive off the pavement edge and onto the shoulder of the road. . .

- Grip the steering wheel tightly and ease your foot off the gas pedal.
- Gently apply the brake to reduce your speed.
- Check for traffic behind you, then steer gently back onto the road.

Flat Tire, Blowout, or Wheel Loss

If while driving, you get a flat tire, your tire blows out, or you lose a wheel. . .

- Grip the steering wheel tightly and ease your foot off the gas pedal.
- Gently apply the brakes.
- If you begin to skid, turn the steering wheel **in the direction of the skid**.
- As you recover, gently straighten the car and don't use the brake until you have the vehicle under control.
- Pull your car well off the road as soon as it is safe to do so.

Brake Failure

If your brake pedal is fully depressed but the brakes fail to respond. . .

- Pump the brake pedal several times rapidly to build up brake fluid pressure, but **do not pump antilock brakes**.
- Downshift to a lower gear, and work your way down to the lowest gear, if necessary.
- Apply the parking brake gently, but hold the brake release in case your vehicle starts to skid.

- If you cannot slow your vehicle, sound your horn and flash your lights to warn drivers or pedestrians around you.

Stuck Gas Pedal

If your gas pedal (accelerator) sticks. . .

- Put your car in neutral and apply the brakes to slow down.
- Using your foot, try to free the gas pedal.
- If the gas pedal doesn't release, reapply the brakes.
- Keep your eyes on the road.
- When safe to do so, pull your vehicle to the side of the road and bring it to a stop.

Vehicle Approaching Head On

If a vehicle approaches you head on in your lane. . .

- Slow down and pull to the right.
- Sound your horn to alert the other driver.

Headlight Failure

If your headlights suddenly go out. . .

- Turn on your parking lights, emergency flashers, or turn signal.
- Try the headlight switch a few times.
- Pull off the road as quickly as possible and leave your emergency flashers on.

Stalling on Railroad Tracks

If your vehicle stalls on railroad tracks and you know a train is approaching. . .

- Get yourself and any passengers out of your vehicle and off the tracks, and move as far from the tracks as you can. Try to signal the train any way you safely can.
- To avoid being hit by debris, run from your vehicle in the direction the train is coming from.

If your vehicle stalls on railroad tracks and you are not sure whether a train is approaching. . .

- Roll down your window or open your door and listen for an approaching train.
- Try to start your engine.
- If your vehicle won't start, shift to neutral and try to push the vehicle off the tracks.
- If you cannot move your vehicle from the tracks, call the police immediately to report the situation.

If your car is caught on a crossing for any reason, contact the local or state police as quickly as possible and ask them to call the railroad station manager. The police may be able to stop any approaching trains before a collision.

Breakdowns

- Move your vehicle off the pavement to the side of the road. Never park on a hill or on a curve where others cannot see you. If you cannot get your vehicle off the pavement, safely get all passengers out of the vehicle and off the road.

On a highway with a breakdown lane or shoulder, move your vehicle as far from the travel lane as possible. Do *not* stand anywhere near the travel lane or in the breakdown lane, if you can avoid doing so.

- Turn on your emergency warning lights (flashers). At night, also turn on your vehicle's interior lights.
- Tie a white cloth to your antenna or door handle (use a red cloth when it's snowing). Raise your vehicle's hood.
- If you have flares or reflective signs, place them 200 feet in front of and behind your vehicle to warn other drivers.

The CaresVan program, which is operated by the MassHighway Department and sponsored by Commerce Insurance Company, promotes highway safety and provides assistance to stranded motorists. For more information, visit www.commerceinsurance.com/documents/CaresVan.pdf

Car Catches Fire

If you see smoke coming from under your vehicle's hood. . .

- Pull off the road, turn off the ignition, and move away from the vehicle.
- Call the fire department or emergency services.
- Do not try to fight the fire unless you have an extinguisher.

Vehicle Plunges into Water

If your car plunges into water. . .

- Unfasten your safety belt and escape through a window.
- If you have power windows, open them quickly before the water causes them to short circuit.
- Do not open a door, because doing so would cause water to rush in and your vehicle could turn over on top of you.

If your vehicle sinks before you can get out, climb into the rear seat. An air pocket may form there, because the weight of the engine will cause the car to sink nose first. When the vehicle settles, take a deep breath and escape through a window.

Traffic Accidents

Each year, more than 140,000 motor vehicle crashes are reported in Massachusetts. Obeying the rules of the road, following the guidelines in this manual, and learning to drive defensively can reduce your risk of a collision or fatal accident. If you are involved in or witness a crash of any sort, state law requires you to respond as explained in this section.

If You Are Involved in an Accident

When you're involved in a crash, regardless of how minor it seems, you must stop your vehicle. **Never leave the scene of an accident.** It's against the law. You could be charged with a "hit and run" violation.

Property Damage Only

1. Move your vehicle off the road, if possible.
2. Exchange name, address, driver's license number, vehicle registration, and insurance information with all drivers or property owners who are involved. You must show your driver's license and registration, if asked to do so.
3. If you have damaged a parked vehicle or stationary property, **you must try to locate the owner to report the accident or notify the local police.**
4. Within five days of the event, you must complete and file an accident report with both the RMV and the local police department. You must report *any* crash in which there has been \$1,000 or more of property damage.
5. If you've injured a cat, a dog, or any other animal, **notify the local police and, if possible, the animal's owner.**

If you have a cellular phone, you can contact the state police to report any emergency by dialing 911.

Accidents Involving Injuries

1. Check to see whether anyone is injured.
2. Call the police and request an ambulance or a rescue squad, if necessary.
3. If possible, move your vehicle off the road.
4. Exchange name, address, driver's license number, vehicle registration, and insurance information with anyone who is injured or with any other driver who is involved. You must show your driver's license and registration if asked to do so.
5. Within five days of the event, you must complete and file an accident report with both the RMV and the local police department. The law requires you to report *any* accident in which someone is killed or injured or in which there has been \$1,000 or more of property damage.
6. Notify your insurance company.

Emergency First Aid Tips

- Don't move an injured person unless it is absolutely necessary. If you must move someone because of a life-threatening situation, fully support the person's head and spine.
- Check to see if the person is breathing. If the person is not breathing and you are certified in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), begin performing CPR immediately.
- If the person is bleeding, put pressure directly on the wound. Maintain pressure until help arrives.
- Cover the injured person with a blanket or coat to provide warmth and prevent shock.

If You Witness an Accident

If you drive by an accident with police and emergency vehicles at the scene, use common sense and good judgment. Reduce your speed and drive cautiously, looking out for people and equipment in the road. Do not stop or slow down to “sightsee.” You will only create a hazard and disrupt traffic.

If you arrive at an unattended accident scene:

1. Park your car off the road and turn on your emergency flashers so that your vehicle warns others.
2. Check to see if anyone is injured.
3. If you have a cellular phone, call the police. If you don't have a cellular phone, tell the next person with a phone who stops to call the police.
4. If you or someone else at the scene has flares, emergency triangles, or reflectors, place them 200 feet or more in front of and behind the accident scene to warn approaching traffic.
5. Follow the emergency first aid tips described in the preceding section.
6. If possible, move any vehicle involved in the accident out of the traffic lane.
7. Turn off the ignition of any vehicle involved in the accident.

Reporting an accident to your insurance company alone does not satisfy your legal obligation.

If utility poles have been hit and any electrical wires have fallen, do not go near them. If electrical wires have landed on one of the vehicles involved in the crash, tell the occupants to remain inside their vehicles until emergency personnel arrive. Do not touch the vehicle.

Reporting an Accident

The law requires you to report any motor vehicle accident in which you are involved, in which someone is killed or hurt, or in which there has been \$1,000 or more in property damage. You must file a written report with the RMV within five days of the accident.

Accident/Motor Vehicle Crash Operator Report forms are available at local police stations, RMV branches, or by calling the RMV's Phone Center. You can also download these forms from our website at www.mass.gov/rmv.

Where to send completed reports:

1. Mail or deliver one copy to your local police department in the city or town where the crash occurred.
2. Mail one copy to your Insurance Company.
3. Mail one copy to the RMV at the address below.

**Crash Records, Registry of Motor Vehicles,
P.O. Box 55889, Boston, MA 02205-5889**

It is recommended that a copy should be kept for your own files.