

Chapter 8: Defensive Driving



CHAPTER EIGHT DEFENSIVE DRIVING

Defensive Driving

Note: Practice quizzes are available only for those sections of the manual covering rules of the road (Chapters 4 through 11 and Road Signs).

Most drivers are good drivers. But even the best drivers make errors now and then. Equipment fails, weather conditions can be bad, and some drivers ignore traffic laws or drive in an erratic manner. To prevent making errors or being involved in a crash because of someone else's error, learn to drive in a defensive manner.

Be prepared and look ahead.

Maintain the correct speed.

Signal before you turn or change lanes.

Allow space.

Wear your seat belt.

Do not drive if you are very weary, are on medication, or have been drinking beverages that contain alcohol.

Keep your vehicle in good condition.

Do not use handheld mobile devices while driving.

Be Prepared and Look Ahead

You should sit in a comfortable, but vertical position, and keep both hands on the steering wheel. Slouching in the driver's seat or using only one hand on the wheel makes it more difficult or even dangerous to control your vehicle.

Traffic conditions change continuously. Always scan the road ahead. Do not use the road or even the vehicle ahead as your only points of focus. Look ahead so you can prevent, or decrease, possible problems.

Keep your eyes moving, notice what is happening at the sides of the road, and check behind you through your mirrors every few seconds.

Anticipate errors by other drivers, bicyclists, and pedestrians and think about what you will do if an error occurs. Do not assume that a driver who approaches a STOP or YIELD sign on a side road is actually going to stop or yield. It is better to assume the other driver will not stop.

Driver Distractions

A distraction is anything that takes your attention away from driving. Distracted driving can cause crashes, resulting in injury, death, or property damage. Taking your eyes off the road or hands off the steering wheel presents obvious driving risks. Mental activities that take your mind away from driving are just as dangerous.

When driving:

- Do not use cell phones or text.
- Avoid arguments and stressful or emotional conversations with passengers.
- Avoid eating while driving.
- Be sure children are properly and safely restrained.
- Properly secure pets in a pet carrier or portable kennel.

You must pay attention to the driving task. You are responsible for operating your vehicle in a safe manner.

Aggressive Drivers

Aggressive driving includes speeding, which often leads to following too closely, frequent or quick lane changes without a signal, passing on the shoulder or parts of the roadway that are not paved or being a nuisance to motorists, bicyclists or pedestrians, who don't get out of the way. Aggressive drivers sometimes run stop signs and red lights, pass stopped school buses, fail to keep right, drive while impaired by alcohol or drugs and drive in a reckless manner. Some aggressive drivers try to cause damage to another driver, and that is how aggressive driving becomes road rage.

To prevent road rage, it is sometimes better not to make eye contact with another driver. The other driver can take this as being challenged.

When an aggressive driver confronts you:

- Do not make eye contact.
- Remain calm and relaxed.

- Try to move away safely.
- Do not challenge an aggressive driver with increased speed or try to hold your position in your travel lane.
- Wear a seat belt and encourage your passengers to do the same.
- Ignore gestures and shouts and do not return them.
- Report aggressive drivers to law enforcement authorities and give a vehicle description, location, vehicle plate number and direction of travel.
- If an aggressive driver is following you, do not stop or leave your vehicle. Drive to the nearest police station.
- If an aggressive driver is involved in a crash, stop a safe distance from the crash scene. When the police arrive, report the driving behavior you saw.

To avoid becoming an aggressive driver:

- Allow enough travel time to reach your destination on schedule.
- Adjust your schedule to prevent driving during times with the most highway traffic.
- If you are late, call ahead so you can relax.
- Do not drive when you are angry, upset or very tired.
- Make your vehicle comfortable. Listen to relaxing music and prevent conditions that make you anxious.
- When you drive, relax and be aware of how you sit. Sit back in your seat, loosen your hold on the steering wheel and do not grind your teeth.
- Be polite, courteous and forgiving to other drivers.
- You can control how you react. If another person drives aggressively, do not do the same.

If you have the right-of-way, do not think of it as a complete right. Be prepared to yield the right-of-way to other highway users. To wait a few seconds for another driver is far better than to risk a crash.

Road Rage

What is "road rage"? Road rage is an angry, hostile state which can increase into violent criminal actions, or attempts of violent actions, that result from the operation of a motor vehicle. Road rage can include behavior to provoke others or to make them fearful.

Aggressive driving is not road rage. However, aggressive driving can become road rage. Aggressive driving generally involves the violation of a traffic safety law, while road rage involves the breaking of a criminal law.

Who can become road raged? It could happen to anyone when our irritation or anger with others leads us to behavior that is a threat to ourselves and to the safety and lives of others on and near the road or highways. To endanger, threaten or assault another person is illegal. These behaviors can result in severe penalties that include fines, imprisonment and court-ordered probation. They can also mean revocation and suspension of a driver license.

Road Rage Can Include:

- Shouts, excessive use of a horn or obscene gestures and threats.
- Driving actions like when you cut off another vehicle, drive too closely, block another vehicle so it can not use a traffic lane, chase another vehicle or run it off the road, or deliberately slam into a vehicle.
- When you stop a vehicle at the side of the road, and get out to threaten, attack, fight or injure another motorist or passenger or a pedestrian, bicyclist or other person.

Research indicates that being in a state of rage can affect your blood pressure and your ability to reason and make decisions. As a driver, you will make more errors. The chance of being involved in a traffic crash will increase.

Aggressive driving and road rage can lead to revoked or suspended driver licenses, problems between family members and friends, loss of employment and legal problems.

Many drivers do not recognize when their own aggressive driving or their own road rage is affecting their ability to drive safely. State law requires every DMV-approved accident prevention course to address the hazards and dangers of road rage. For information about DMV-approved accident prevention courses, see [Point and Insurance Reduction Program](#). You can also contact one of the program sponsors. Information is available at any state or county motor vehicle office.

Speed

You must obey the speed limit. If no limit is posted, drive no more than 55 mph (88 km/h). Often, it is common sense to keep your actual speed below the posted limit. For example, the legal limit on a slippery or fogged-in expressway might be 55 mph (88 km/h), or even 65 mph (105 km/h), but the safe speed to drive would be much lower. Even if you were to drive at 50 mph (80 km/h) on that hazardous highway, a police officer could ticket you for a speed "not reasonable" for the conditions.

To keep a smooth traffic flow, some highways also have minimum speed limits. If you drive slower than the minimum speed you can halt the traffic flow and create a dangerous condition. Even if there is no minimum speed limit, those driving too slowly can be as dangerous as those who drive too fast.

Know that some cities have speed limits less than 55 mph (88 km/h) that are not always posted. For example, the speed limit is 25 mph (40 km/h) in New York City unless another limit is posted.

Allow Yourself Space

Four of every 10 crashes involve rear-end collisions, normally because a person is following too closely (tailgating). Leave enough room between your vehicle and the one ahead so you can stop safely if the other vehicle stops suddenly. Brake early and gently when you prepare to stop or turn. It gives drivers behind you plenty of warning that you plan to decrease your speed.

For a good "space cushion," use the two-second rule: Select an object near or above the road ahead like a sign, tree or overpass. As the vehicle ahead passes it, count slowly, "one thousand one, one thousand two." If you reach the same object before you finish the count, you are following too closely. In bad weather and when following large trucks, increase the count to at least three or four seconds for additional space.

If a driver follows you too closely (tailgates) move to another lane if possible, or reduce speed and pull off the road to let the driver go by. Make sure to signal when you drive off the road and when you return to it. Do not press your brakes suddenly or unnecessarily as this may startle the motorist behind you and could escalate into road rage.

In case you must change lanes quickly or pull over to avoid a hazard, leave some "escape" room to your left and right.

Seat Belts, Child Safety Seats, and Air Bags

Seat belts save lives and can prevent serious injuries in traffic crashes. This is why New York State requires seat belt use by adults in motor vehicles and seat belts, booster seats or child safety seats for children.



CORRECT



INCORRECT

New York is a "primary enforcement" state. A law enforcement officer can issue a traffic ticket for failure to wear a seat belt. This law also applies to visitor from outside New York State.

Highlights of the New York State occupant restraint law:

- The driver must be properly restrained by a seat belt. The driver can face a fine of up to \$50 if they fail to buckle up.
- A passenger age sixteen (16) years of age or older must be properly restrained by a seat belt, one person per belt. A passenger age sixteen (16) years of age or older can face a fine of up to \$50 if they fail to buckle up.

- The driver must make sure that each passenger under the age of sixteen (16) is properly restrained by a seat belt or appropriate child restraint system. The driver can face a fine of \$25 to \$100 and receive three points on their driver license for each violation.
- A child under the age of four (4) must be restrained in a federally approved child safety seat (examples include infant only, convertible, combination, all-in-one car seat) that is attached to a vehicle by a safety belt or universal anchorage (LATCH) system. A child must be restrained in the rear-facing position until they are two (2) years old or reach the highest weight or height limit allowed by the car seat manufacturer. For babies that outgrow their infant-only car seat, it is recommended that a convertible or all-in-one seat be used in the rear facing position until they outgrow the highest weight or height limit allowed by the manufacturer for the rear facing position.
- A child between the age of four (4) and seven (7) must be restrained in an appropriate federally approved child restraint system (commonly referred to as a booster seat) used with lap and shoulder belt. An appropriate child safety restraint system means the child meets the size and weight recommendations of the manufacturer. A vehicle's seat belts are not defined as appropriate child restraint systems under the law as they are not designed for use by children.
- All other passengers between the ages of eight (8) and fifteen (15) must be properly restrained by a seat belt, one person per belt. If a child is eight (8) years old or older and is under 4'9" tall or weighs less than 100 pounds, continued use of an appropriate child restraint system is recommended. If the child is four (4) years of age or older, but under the age of eight (8) and is over 4'9" tall and/or weighs more than 100 pounds, the child may be restrained by a seat belt. If the seat belt does not fit correctly, it is recommended that the child continue to use an appropriate child restraint system.
- Exemptions: Seat belt use is not required in certain emergency vehicles, 1964 or older vehicles, by passengers in buses (except school buses; but seat belt use in a school bus can be required by a school district), rural letter carriers while discharging the duties of such employment, passengers in taxi and livery vehicles under the age of eight (8), and passengers or operators with a physically disabling condition that prevents them from being restrained, provided that such condition is duly certified by a physician.

When you drive, you must make sure each person in your vehicle is properly restrained by a seat belt, child restraint system or car seat. During a crash, a person not properly restrained becomes a flying object and a danger to each person in the vehicle.

- For added protection, adjust your vehicle head rest, lock the doors and do not keep loose, heavy objects in the passenger area. Put them in the trunk.
- Air bags are meant to work **WITH** seat belts, not to replace them. An air bag protects a front-seat occupant in a head-on crash by inflating on impact and providing a cushion, so the occupant does not collide with the steering wheel, dashboard or windshield. The combination of a seat belt and an air bag offers maximum protection, partly because they help the driver maintain control of the vehicle and help prevent secondary collisions.
- Air bags engage (expand quickly) from the steering wheel and/or dashboard. Most adults who are correctly fastened are safer in a vehicle with air bags, but the pressure of an air bag as it opens could injure those who sit too close to it. You should sit with at least 10 inches between the center of your chest and the cover of the air bag. Place your hands on the opposite sides of the steering wheel at the 3 and 9 o'clock positions to keep them away if the air bag engages.

IMPORTANT: NEVER PUT AN INFANT IN A REAR-FACING CHILD SAFETY SEAT IN THE FRONT SEAT OF A VEHICLE THAT HAS A PASSENGER AIR BAG.

How to Drive Safely in Work Zones

Areas where road work takes place are dangerous to drive in -- and to work in. That is why when you speed in work zones, ticket fines double, even when the workers or work vehicles are not there. Expect to find a work zone wherever you drive - you may have to decrease speed quickly or even stop. Traffic lanes can shift or be completely closed. Workers and work vehicles can be on or near your driving lane. When you drive in a work zone, make it safer because you know what to do.

Orange signs in the shape of diamonds -- "work zone" warning signs -- are often placed before road construction projects and other work areas that can change traffic flow. One sign can read: "flagger ahead." A flagger is a worker who motions for you to stop, continue with caution or change lanes. A flagger has the same authority as a sign, which indicates you can receive a ticket for disobeying their directions.

Decrease speed! Be Alert! Obey the signs!

Work Zone Tips:

- Some signs can indicate a detour that allows you to avoid the work zone. If you already know where a work zone is ahead, you should try to use a different route.
- As you enter a work zone, flashing signs or signs with arrows or signs that warn "lane closed ahead" mean you should merge your vehicle into the correct lane when it is safe. Do not speed to the end of the closed lane and try to get into the other lane. If you move to the correct lane at first notice, you will drive in a calmer, more efficient and safe manner.
- Decrease your speed when a sign indicates: "Road Work 1,500 feet," that means your car, with a speed of 60 miles per hour, will get there in 17 seconds.
- The rear-end collision is the most common crash in a work zone. To avoid being involved in one, it helps to keep a braking distance of two seconds or more between you and the vehicle in front of you. (See "Allow Yourself Space," above) Keep a safe distance between your vehicle and traffic barriers, trucks, construction equipment and workers.
- Some work zones are not stationary, like when workers paint lines, patch roads or mow. In these cases, the size and/or location of the work zones may change. As work progresses, the work zone size may increase, decrease, or move to different sections of the roadway. Workers can be close even if you do not see them immediately after the warning signs. Obey the signs until you pass the one that states the work zone has ended.

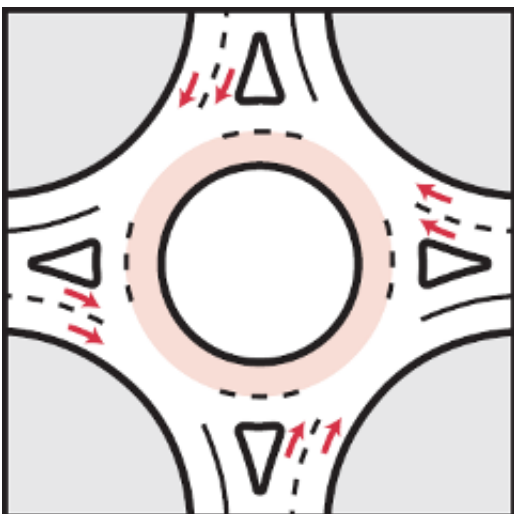
How to Drive Through a Roundabout

A "roundabout" is a round intersection with a small diameter that makes drivers decrease speed, normally to 30 mph or less. Studies show a roundabout can reduce the number and severity of accidents at an intersection, compared to intersections controlled by stop signs or traffic signals. Roundabouts, or rotaries, are now more common in New York State and other states.



When Using Roundabouts or Traffic Circles:

- As you get near the roundabout, look for the street and direction signs you need. This will help you know which exit to take. These signs will be provided along the roadside before you reach the entrance to the roundabout. Slow down when you enter the roundabout. A sign, like the one above, warns of a roundabout.
- When you arrive at the roundabout, yield the right-of-way to any pedestrians and bicyclists. You must also yield to any drivers who were in the roundabout before you. Sometimes a stop sign or traffic signal will control your point of entry. When the traffic level allows enough space and time, you may enter the roundabout in a counterclockwise direction.
- While inside the roundabout, remain in your lane until you are ready to exit. Use your right turn signal to let the other users know your intention to move from the "inside path" to the "outside path"; or if you are in position to exit now. Start to signal at the exit BEFORE the one you want to take. Do not change lanes or take an exit before you check for vehicles that may be continuing through the roundabout in the lane next to you or behind you. Expect vehicles to be in the "blind spots" you cannot see in your mirrors. (See "Blind Spots," [Chapter 11](#)).



Drowsy and Fatigued Driving

Driving and sleep do not mix. When you are behind the wheel of a car or truck, fatigue is dangerous. If you are tired when driving you are slower to react and are not as aware as you should be, and your judgment will be impaired. As with drugs and alcohol, drowsiness can contribute to a traffic crash.

Symptoms of Fatigue

Researchers have found the following symptoms to be associated with drowsy driving:

- Your eyes close or go out of focus by themselves.
- You find it difficult to keep your head up.
- You continue to yawn.
- Your thoughts wander and are disconnected.
- You do not remember driving the last few miles.
- You drift between lanes, tailgate or miss traffic signs.
- You must jerk the car back into the lane.
- You have drifted off the road and hit the rumble strips which produce a loud noise and vibrations.

Who is most at risk? All Drivers who are:

- Deprived of sleep or fatigued.
- Driving long distances without rest breaks.
- Driving through the night or at times when you are normally asleep.
- Taking medication that increases sleepiness or drinking alcohol.
- Driving alone.
- Driving on long, rural, or boring roads.
- Frequent travelers, e.g., business travelers and long-distance commuters.
- Young People — Drowsy driving crashes are most common for young people, who tend to stay up late, sleep too little and drive at night.
- Shift Workers — Drivers who have non-traditional work schedules have a greater risk of being involved in a fatigue-related traffic crash.
- People With Undiagnosed Sleep Disorders — The presence of a sleep disorder increases the risk of crashes. If you find you are regularly tired in the daytime or experience any of these symptoms on a regular basis, you may have a sleep disorder and should seek medical help.

Effective Countermeasures

Prevention

Before you embark on a trip, you should:

- Get enough sleep.
- Plan to drive long trips with a companion.
- Schedule regular stops for every 100 miles or two hours.
- Avoid alcohol and medications (over-the-counter and prescribed) that may impair performance. Check

with your doctor or pharmacist about any medication you are taking. Alcohol interacts with fatigue, increasing its effects.

- You are not at your best if you are ill or very tired. Do not drive for at least 15 minutes after waking from sleep.

Actions for the Drowsy Driver

Once driving, you must:

- Recognize that you are close to sleep and cannot calculate when sleep may occur.
- Not depend on the radio, open window or other "tricks" to keep you awake.
- Find a safe place to stop for a break in response to symptoms of fatigue.
- Pull off into a safe area away from traffic and take a brief nap (15 to 45 minutes).
- Drink coffee or another source of caffeine to promote short-term alertness if needed. (It takes about 30 minutes for caffeine to enter the bloodstream.)

NOTE: See [Chapter 9](#) for more information about the dangers of driving under the influence of alcohol and other drugs.

Using a Cellular or Mobile Telephone

A driver can become distracted from safe driving by use of a mobile telephone (like a cellular telephone). In New York State, it is a traffic infraction to speak into or listen to a hand-held mobile telephone while driving. For a first offense you could pay a fine up to \$200 and receive five license points. The phone may be hand-held to activate, begin, or end a call. Exemptions are provided for calls for emergency situations, for police and other law enforcement officers and for fire department personnel and operators of authorized emergency vehicles in the performance of official duties. In New York State, a hands-free mobile telephone allows the user to communicate without the use of either hand. A driver can use a hands-free telephone at any time.

Penalties for Texting, Electronic Device Use

In New York State, it is illegal to use portable electronic devices, such as cell phones and smart phones, to send or receive text messages or e-mails while driving. The penalty for a first offense is a fine of up to \$200. A second offense (both committed within 18 months) is a fine up to \$250. A third or subsequent offense (all committed within 18 months) is a fine up to \$450. Also, drivers with probationary and junior licenses who use a hand-held phone or text while driving will receive a 120-day suspension for a first conviction and a revocation of at least one year for subsequent convictions within six months of the time a license is restored after suspension.

Vehicle Condition

No person shall operate or park a vehicle on public highways unless it has been inspected at least once a year, but that does not mean it is the only time you should have safety equipment checked. Follow your owner's

manual for routine maintenance. Have problems corrected by a qualified mechanic as soon as possible. Do not wait until mechanical problems cause breakdowns or crashes.

Pay special attention to the maintenance and repair of the brakes, steering mechanism, lights, tires and horn. Depend on your owner's manual and an experienced mechanic as keys to a safe vehicle. It is the operator's responsibility to ensure that the vehicle being driven is safe.

Here are some common problems and some equipment checks you can do.

- **BRAKES** - Brakes that pull to one side may be wet or may need to be adjusted or repaired. If wet, you can dry them riding the pedal lightly. If this does not help, have your brakes checked by a mechanic. If you notice any change in the brake performance, have them checked immediately.
- **STEERING** - There should not be much free movement in the steering wheel. If your vehicle has power steering, check the fluid level periodically. A noise like a whine when you make a sharp turn can be indicate a problem.
- **LIGHTS** - Keep your lights clean and free of dirt, snow and ice. Broken lenses can cause dangerous glare for other drivers, so replace them as soon as you can. Make sure headlights are adjusted correctly to give you the best view of the road.
- **TIRES** - The law requires that your tires have at least 2/32nds of an inch (.16 cm) of tread. Most tires for passenger cars and light trucks have indicators called "wear bars" that show across the tire grooves when the minimum tread depth is reached. You can check your tread depth with a penny. Hold a penny with Abraham Lincoln's body between your thumb and forefinger. Place Lincoln's head first into the deepest looking groove. Can you see all of his head? If yes, your tires are too worn – don't drive on them, and make sure to get them replaced. It is also illegal to drive with tires that have cuts down to the cords, bumps or bulges. Refer to your owner's manual or a tire store about correct tire pressure, and check it often with a reliable gauge.
- **GLASS** - Keep your windows clean and clear. Replace worn wiper blades. Keep your defroster and rear window defogger in good condition and make sure there is enough windshield fluid in the reservoir.
- **HORN** - Your horn is important safety equipment that could become your only means of warning other drivers or pedestrians of possible problems. If the horn does not work, get it repaired as soon as possible. It should be used properly, not to express anger at other drivers or pedestrians.

Questions

Before you move on to Chapter 9, make sure you can answer these questions:

- Should you always look straight ahead when you drive?
- If there is no posted speed limit, what is the fastest you can legally drive in New York City?
- Is it always safe to drive at the assigned speed limit?

- What is the purpose of minimum speed limits?
- Who must wear seat belts? Who should wear them?
- How can you prevent fatigue on a long trip?
- What is road rage? How can you prevent becoming involved in road rage?
- How should you drive safely through a work zone? A roundabout?

[Chapter 8 Quiz](#)