

Driver Safety Letter

presented by



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Speeding—exceeding a speed limit or driving too fast for conditions—is one of the most common factors in motor vehicle crashes in the United States. Speed increases crash risk in two ways: (1) it increases the likelihood of being involved in a crash, and (2) it increases the severity of injuries sustained by all road users in a crash.

Driving too fast for conditions is defined as traveling at a speed that is greater than a reasonable standard for safe driving. Examples of conditions where drivers may find themselves driving too fast include: wet roadways (rain, snow, or ice), reduced visibility (fog), uneven roads, construction zones, curves, intersections, gravel roads, and heavy traffic. The Large Truck Crash Causation Study (LTCCS) reported that 23% of large-truck crashes occurred when commercial motor vehicle (CMV) drivers were traveling too fast for conditions.

Below are some tips that will help you maintain a safe speed for various driving conditions.

Tip 1: Reduce your driving speed in adverse road and/or weather conditions. Adjust your speed to safely match weather conditions, road conditions, visibility, and traffic. Excessive driving speed is a major cause of fatal crashes and higher speeds may cause more severe crashes. You should reduce your speed by 1/3 on wet roads and by 1/2 or more on snow packed roads (i.e., if you would normally be traveling at a speed of 60 mph on dry pavement, then on a wet road you should reduce your speed to 40 mph, and on a snow-packed road you should reduce your speed to 30 mph). When you come upon slick, icy roads you should drive slowly and cautiously and pull off the road if you can no longer safely control the vehicle. Did you know that when it first starts to rain, water mixes with oil on the road making it particularly slippery?

Manufacturers generally advise drivers not to use a retarder [also called a "Jake" brake] on wet or slippery roadway conditions. In fact, a Safety Board Investigation of a motor coach crash that occurred in Canon City, Colorado, in December 1999, revealed that an enabled retarder most likely triggered the loss of control and eventual crash of the motor coach on a snow-covered and mountainous roadway.

Tip 2: Enter a curve slowly. Speed limits posted on curve warning signs are intended for passenger vehicles, not large trucks. Large trucks should reduce their speed even further. Studies have shown that large trucks entering a curve, even at the posted speed limit, have lost control and rolled over due to their high center of gravity. Some 40% of speeding-related fatalities occur on curves. Braking in a curve can cause the wheels to lock up and the vehicle to skid.

TIP 3: Reduce speed before entering an exit/entrance ramp. In a similar vein, approach an exit/entrance ramp at a safe speed. Truck rollovers are more likely to occur on exit/entrance ramps when the driver misjudges the sharpness of the ramp curve and enters the curve at an excessive speed. Even though ramps and interchanges make up less than 5% of all highway miles, 20-30% of all large-truck crashes occur on or near ramps.

TIP 4: Drive slowly with a loaded trailer. Loaded trailers have a higher center of gravity and sudden speed adjustment may cause the load to shift, leading to skidding or a rollover. Are you aware that large trucks with fully loaded trailers are 10 times more likely to roll over than those with empty trailers? And loaded trailers require 20-40% more braking distance than passenger vehicles to come to a complete stop.

TIP 5: Slow down in work zones. Before entering a work zone, decrease your speed, merge into the correct lane well ahead of any lane closures, and be prepared to slow down or stop suddenly. Speed increases perception-reaction distance, braking distance, and stopping distance. Nearly a quarter of all work-zone deaths involve a commercial vehicle, according to government statistics.

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