

6. Be in Shape to Drive

Driving safely is not always easy. In fact, it is one of the most complex things that people do. It also is one of the few things we do regularly that can injure and kill us. It is worth the effort to be a careful driver.

To be a safe driver takes a lot of skill and judgment. This task is even more difficult when you are just learning to drive. Driving can easily take all the ability you have. Your ability to be a safe driver depends on being able to see clearly, not being overly tired, not driving while on drugs, being generally healthy, and being emotionally fit to drive. In other words, being in “shape” to drive safely.

Seeing Clearly

Most of what you do in driving depends on what you see. To be a good driver, you need to see well. The single biggest contributor to accidents is failing to see what is happening. You must look down the road, to the sides and behind your vehicle, and be alert for unexpected events. At night and at other times when it is hard to see, you must use your headlights. You must be able to stop within the distance you can see with your headlights. For example, in many accidents with motorcycles, bicycles and pedestrians, drivers reported that they looked but did not see them.

In order to see, drivers must be alert to what is going on around them. Many accidents occur because drivers do not pay enough attention to their driving. Do not take your eyes off the road for more than an instant at any one time. For example, if you need to look at a map, pull safely off the road before you try to look at it. Do not try to read the map while you are driving.

If you have a cellular phone or CB radio, avoid using it when the vehicle is in motion. Even with “hands free” equipment, conversing on a phone or radio takes your attention away from driving. This increases the chance you won’t notice hazardous situations.

Do not stare at accidents, someone getting a ticket, or other roadside activity. Staring could cause you to be in an accident. If you take your eyes off the road to look at something, you could run into a vehicle ahead that has slowed or stopped. Staring also can increase congestion. When you pass these roadside activities, keep your eyes on the road and get past them as soon and as safely as you can.

Make sure you do not drive with your Persons With Disabilities Parking Permit hanging from your rearview mirror. Your Persons With Disabilities Parking Permit can hide cars and pedestrians from your view. **Remember:** This permit should be displayed only when parked.

Good vision is a must for safe driving. You drive based on what you see. If you cannot see clearly, you will have trouble identifying traffic and road conditions, spotting potential trouble, and reacting in a timely manner. Refer to pages 5 and 6 for vision information and standards.

Rain or Snow

In a very heavy rain or snowstorm, you may not be able to see more than 200 feet ahead. In a very heavy downpour, you may not be able to see well enough to drive. If this happens, pull off the road in a safe place and wait until it clears.

Fog

Fog is one of the most dangerous weather conditions in which to drive. You are basically driving in a cloud of water vapor. If you do not have to drive - don't!

Darkness makes the problem of fog even worse. The water droplets in the fog reflect your headlights right back at you. Keep your headlights on low beam to reduce glare as much as possible. Drive slowly and be ready to stop if you see any red or white lights in front of you. It is impossible to tell if someone is stopped ahead, or if someone is in the wrong lane. Approach any lights with a great deal of caution.

Hills And Curves

You may not know what is on the other side of a hill or just around a curve, even if you have driven the road hundreds of times. If a car is stalled on the road just over a hill or around a curve, you must be able to stop. Whenever you come to a hill or curve where you cannot see over or around, adjust your speed so you can stop if necessary.

Hearing

Hearing can be helpful to safe driving. Do not drive with headphones or earphones that cover or go in both ears. They make it too hard to hear emergency horns or sirens. The sound of horns, sirens or screeching tires can warn you of danger. Hearing problems, like bad eyesight, can come on so slowly that you do not notice it. Drivers who know they are deaf or have hearing problems can adjust and be safe drivers. They learn to rely more on their vision and stay alert. Studies have shown that the driving records of hearing impaired drivers are just as good as those drivers with good hearing. A hearing impairment may be indicated on your driver’s license; ask the examiner at the driver’s license station for details.

Fatigue

When you are tired you cannot drive as safely as when you are rested. It takes you more time to make decisions and you do not always make good decisions. You can be more irritable and can get upset more easily. Lastly, when you are tired you could fall asleep behind the wheel and crash.

There are things you can do to help from getting tired on a long trip.

- Try to get a normal night’s sleep before you leave.
- Do not leave on a trip if you are already tired. Plan your trips so you can leave when you are rested.
- Do not take any medicine that can make you drowsy.
- Eat lightly. Do not eat a large meal before you leave. Some people get sleepy after they eat a big meal.
- Take breaks. Stop every hour or so, or when you need to. Walk around, get some fresh air, and have coffee, soda or juice. The few minutes spent on a rest break can save your life. Plan for plenty of time to complete your trip safely.
- Try not to drive late at night when you would normally be sleeping.
- Never drive if you are sleepy. It is better to stop and sleep for a few hours than to take a chance you can stay awake. If possible, switch off with another driver.

Alcohol and Drugs

The use of alcohol while driving is one of the leading causes of accidents, especially fatal accidents. Twenty eight percent of all fatal Iowa accidents are related to alcohol use. More than 70 percent of these alcohol-related deaths are people between the ages of 16 and 34!

No one can drink alcohol and drive safely, even if you have many years of driving experience. New drivers are more affected by alcohol than experienced drivers because new drivers are still learning to drive.

Because drinking alcohol and then driving is so dangerous, the penalties are very tough. People who drive after drinking risk getting heavy fines, higher insurance rates, loss of their driver's licenses, and even jail sentences.

Why is Drinking and Driving So Dangerous?

Alcohol reduces all of the important skills you need to drive safely. After you drink alcohol, it goes from your stomach into your blood and to all parts of your body. It reaches your brain in 20 to 40 minutes. In your brain, alcohol affects those areas of your brain that control judgment and skill. This is one reason why drinking alcohol is so dangerous; it affects your judgment. Good judgment is important to driving. You may think you are driving better or are more capable when the exact opposite is true.

Alcohol slows your reflexes and reaction time, reduces your ability to see clearly, and makes you less alert. As the amount of alcohol in your body increases, your judgment worsens and your skill decreases. You will have trouble judging distances, speeds and the movement of other vehicles.

It reduces your coordination and relaxes your eye muscles, causing your vision to lose its sharpness. Your **night vision is cut in half and your side vision is reduced by one-third**. Your speech and reflexes become worse with each drink.

Alcohol takes effect quickly but it is slow to let go. Only time will get it out of your system. Cold showers, black coffee and exercise will do nothing to sober you up. Once in the body, alcohol must be chemically broken down and oxidized by the liver. This is a slow process.

There are ways of dealing with social drinking situations. Arrange to go with two or more persons, where one of you will not drink alcohol. You can rotate among the group being a "designated driver." If available, you might use public transportation, or use a cab.

The penalties for drinking and driving are severe. See page 16.

Other Drugs and Driving

Drugs can be legal or illegal. They may be taken in any amount under any circumstances. Many people are multiple drug users. That means they use more than one drug.

Drugs are very complicated and so is your body. The same drug may have a different effect on you, depending on what you have been doing or how you are feeling. When you combine drugs, it is very difficult to be sure what will happen. This includes mixing alcohol and prescription medications given to you by your doctor.

One way to group different kinds of drugs is the way you can get them: over-the-counter, prescription, and illegal. Reduce the chance of serious side effects from prescription and over-the-counter drugs by closely following package instructions. Many over-the-counter and prescription medications warn you not to drive or operate heavy equipment while taking the drug.

Illegal drugs are usually bought "on the street," and their content and side effects are unknown. Their strength and purity may vary a great deal. They are very dangerous. For your own safety and the safety of others on the road, do not use street drugs.

All drugs produce two side effects. They produce the effects desired, such as fighting illness or disease. They also can produce side effects that can range from simply unpleasant to fatal.

Most drugs act on the central nervous system. Stimulants speed the body up, depressants slow it down, and hallucinogens affect the way the drug user views the world.

Here is a quick look at some of the more common drugs and their effects:

Amphetamines speed up your body. Tired people, including drivers, incorrectly use these drugs to keep going when they are worn down. That is why they are known as "pep pills" or "uppers." They give users a false sense of alertness and self-confidence which may make a driver take chances he/she would not take when not under the influence of drugs.

Some common amphetamines include cocaine, speed, etc.

Barbiturates are used to slow the body down. They are one of the most abused groups of prescription drugs around. They reduce alertness and energy. They are often prescribed by medical doctors to counteract nervousness or other emotional symptoms. They affect alertness, reaction time, sight and coordination.

Depression often follows when the effects wear off. Tranquilizers are probably the most used barbiturates.

Hallucinogens affect the way the user sees the world. Marijuana, LSD and PCP are some of the most common hallucinogenic drugs, but they are by no means the only ones. These drugs affect the way users view their surroundings. The drugs affect mood, reaction time and the ability to judge time.

Drug use in the U.S. is common. One of every four Americans uses some type of drug each day. Most of these are over-the-counter drugs. Most are used according to the direction and at the proper dosage so they cause no problems. Using drugs for the proper purpose at the recommended dosage and avoiding illegal drugs is the best way to avoid excessive drug use. Be sure to check with your doctor or pharmacist when using a new drug. Your doctor or pharmacist can tell you if it will affect your driving ability or how the drug may be affected by drugs you are already taking. If you plan to use alcohol, check to see how the drug reacts with alcohol.

Health, Emotion and Age

Many health problems can affect your driving, including a bad cold, infection or virus. Even little problems like a stiff neck, a cough or a sore leg can affect your driving. If you are not feeling well and need to go somewhere, let someone else drive.

Some conditions can be very dangerous.

You cannot operate a motor vehicle if you suffer from any type of loss of consciousness or voluntary control until you have remained free of such occurrences or episodes for six months. Your doctor must complete a medical report, available from any driver's license examiner, with a favorable recommendation towards driving.

You will have to take the knowledge, vision and driving tests, and this first license will have the restriction "medical report to be furnished at the end of six months."

A duplicate license will be issued at the end of the six-month period if you meet the medical requirements. It will have a restriction that says "medical report needed for renewal." When this license expires and you can show medical proof of being episode-free, you can renew your license for another two years. You will have the same restriction and all renewals will be for two years.

Help yourself. Take prescribed medication on time and in the proper dosage. Avoid driving when tired and stop to rest along the way.

You may want the medical alert indicator on your license. It is also a good idea to keep the name and number of emergency source for your medication with you in case your regular supply is not available when you need it.

Diabetes: Diabetics who take insulin should not drive when there is any chance of going into shock. Such a situation could result from skipping a meal or snack, or from taking the wrong amount of insulin. It also might be a good idea to have someone else drive for you during times when your doctor is adjusting your insulin dosage. If you have diabetes, you should also have your eyes checked regularly for possible night blindness and other vision problems.

Heart Condition: People with heart diseases, high blood pressure or circulation problems and in danger of a blackout, fainting or a heart attack should not get behind the wheel. If you are being treated by a doctor for a heart condition, ask if the condition could affect your driving safely.

Emotions can have a great affect on your driving safely. You may not be able to drive well if you are overly worried, excited, afraid, angry or just "down."

- If you are angry or excited, give yourself time to cool off. If necessary, take a short walk, but stay off the road until you have calmed down.
- If you are worried or down about something, try to keep your mind on your driving. Some find listening to the radio helps.
- If you are impatient, give yourself extra time for your driving trip. Leave a few minutes early. If you have plenty of time, you may not tend to speed or do other things that can get you a traffic ticket or cause an accident.

You are responsible for what your vehicle does! In addition to limitations your vehicle may have, you should be aware of the limitations **you** may have at different times in your driving career.

If you are 14 to 24 years old, you have some advantages in driving. You also have some serious disadvantages.

As a young driver, your eyesight, depth perception, reflexes and reaction times are at their peak. Unfortunately, you also have major disadvantages -- inexperience and lack of driving maturity.

Young drivers account for only 22 percent of all drivers. Unfortunately, they are involved in nearly 40 percent of all traffic accidents. The accident rate climbs steeply between the ages of 16 and 19 and then drops off after age 20. Your physical advantages do not fully compensate for your lack of driving experience and judgment.

There are several reasons for this.

- You are new at driving. It takes many years to develop good driving skills.
- You are at a time in your life when there is added emotional and physical stress. Pressure from friends and family can be hard to handle. Sometimes it seems like a good idea to hop into the car and drive until you calm down. But, this is **NOT** the time to drive. Your attention will be on your problems, not on the road.
- Alcohol and drugs also relate to the high accident rates for young drivers. Drinking, driving and drugs do not mix. All drugs lower your ability to think clearly and act rapidly. Put this together with driving inexperience and you are an accident waiting to happen.
- High speed is related to the large number of accidents in the 14 to 24 age group. When you are still learning how to handle normal driving conditions, high speed just exaggerates any mistakes you make. The results can be fatal. This age group has the highest percentage of fatal, off-the-road, one-car accidents.

These are reasons insurance companies charge higher rates for younger drivers.

Buckle up every time you get in your car. This simple action can reduce your chance of injury or death by at least 50 percent.

If you are an older driver, you have a great deal of driving experience gained by a lifetime of driving. By age 65, many drivers in your age category have rolled up over 500,000 miles -- equivalent to about 19 times around the earth.

Although you have a great deal of experience and driving maturity, you probably have slowed down physically. In addition, as we age our eyesight weakens and our eyes do not adjust to bright headlights like they used to.

One of the major causes of accidents for the older driver is "failing to yield the right-of-way." Double check intersections before starting out just to make sure you did not overlook a car or truck approaching the intersection.

Many older drivers say they cannot hear as well as they did when they were younger. They worry about how it will affect their driving. In most cases, partial or complete deafness is not much different than driving with the radio or stereo volume on high, the air conditioner on high, or driving with the windows rolled up on a rainy day. Effective use of your mirrors and constant alertness to what is happening around you will compensate for most hearing loss.

With age may come tighter muscles and stiffer joints that combine to reduce overall flexibility. This sometimes makes turning corners and maneuvering your car or truck more difficult than it used to be. If you find this is the case, consider leaving more space between vehicles when driving. Try to drive in areas you are familiar with. Avoid high speeds and congested routes of travel.

Be sure to let other drivers know what you plan to do. Be sure you use your turn signals and move with the flow of the traffic. Remember, driving too slow can be as dangerous as driving too fast.

And remember, alcohol and drugs, including doctor-prescribed medications, can affect your driving ability. If your doctor tells you not to drive because of the medication you are taking or your medical condition, **do not drive!**

Beware of drug interactions. Often older drivers see different medical specialists for a variety of medical conditions. Each of these doctors may prescribe drugs to help the patient. The combination of these drugs may cause unforeseen reactions. Make sure that each of your doctors knows all of the drugs you are taking. Also, make sure you are aware of all the possible side effects of those drugs and change your driving accordingly. Report any drug reactions to all of your doctors.

If you use any mechanical attachments on your vehicle or any artificial limbs, you can still be licensed to drive in Iowa. You may be asked to demonstrate your ability for the examiner. Explain the extent of your disability to the examiner. If you normally wear a prosthesis, wear it for your driving test. The devices must fit properly and let you easily operate all necessary controls.

If there has been a change in your condition or the current license restrictions do not reflect your current condition, the driver examiner may ask you to take a driving test. This is nothing to be afraid of. The examiner will be checking to see what equipment will provide the safest operation of your vehicle. This equipment is designed to make driving easier and safer.

Review Questions (Section 6)

T/F

- _____ 1. You should keep your headlights on high beam when driving in fog. **True/False**
- _____ 2. Driving when tired or fatigued can affect your decision-making skills. **True/False**
- _____ 3. Hearing problems can come on so slowly that you may not notice it. **True/False**
- _____ 4. Alcohol slows your reflexes and reaction time. **True/False**
- _____ 5. Alcohol reduces your ability to see clearly and cuts your night vision in half. **True/False**
- _____ 6. Amphetamines make you a better and safer driver. **True/False**
- _____ 7. Although young drivers make up only 22 percent of the licensed drivers, they are involved in about 40 percent of all highway accidents. **True/False**
- _____ 8. Failure to yield right-of-way is one of the major causes of accidents for older drivers. **True/False**
- _____ 9. If you use any mechanical car attachments or artificial limbs, you cannot be licensed as an Iowa driver. **True/False**
- _____ 10. Doctor-prescribed medications can affect your driving ability. **True/False**

Answers on page 72