



Short Safety Subject

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How To Drive After Dark

Most people dislike driving at night, and the reason is simple. You can't see as far or as well at night as you can in the daytime. Darkness makes driving a challenging job.

It's dangerous, too. According to the National Safety Council, fatal accidents increase sharply during the hours of darkness. In fact, statistics show your chances of being involved in a fatal traffic accident are about three times greater at night than during daylight hours.

But there are things to do, facts to know, and techniques to use that can get and keep you and your vehicle ready for safe night driving.

- Before you start out at night check headlights, taillights and directional signals. A wall or show window makes a good place to check headlights and turn signals to see if they're functioning properly.
- The better you can see the better your chances of avoiding an accident. Clean headlights and windshield - inside as well as outside.
- Have your headlight aim checked if it hasn't been done recently or if you've replaced a headlight. One study indicated one-third to one-half of all vehicles on the road have badly aimed headlights, reducing their effectiveness for the driver and often blinding approaching drivers.

To aim your own headlights you'll need 35 to 40 feet of flat (or constantly sloped) driveway in front of a garage door. Shine your low beams on the door from two to three feet away. Outline the bright spots on the door with a soft pencil or tape. Back car to about 25 feet from the garage door. The top of the low beams should shine no higher than the top of the marks on the door or lower than the center of the marked circle.

On most cars each headlight has two Phillips screws that adjust the beam up or down and left or right. Make the necessary adjustments.

If your car has only two headlights, the high beams are automatically aimed when you aim the low beams. If your car has four headlights, aim the low beams first. They are the outer or upper two lights. Then adjust the high beams until the center of the high is at the top of the low beam.

- When you come out of a lighted building it takes a few minutes for your eyes to adjust to the dark. A two to five minute wait before driving off into the night could pay off in safety. Waiting a few minutes before driving in the dark will improve your vision.
- If you spend a day in bright sunshine - like at the beach or in the snow - it's wise to wear sunglasses. They'll help your eyes preserve their supply of "visual purple," a retinal chemical that helps them adapt to the dark. A day of exposure to much sun and glare without sunglasses can drastically reduce ability to see at night.
- Don't drink and drive. Besides the obvious reasons, alcohol can drastically slow the direct affect of the eye's sensitivity, it takes the eye a second or two longer to hunt around for what it was seeing, and in that time an accident can occur.

- Don't wear any kind of sunglasses at night. There are no glasses designed to reduce headlight glare at night. Any lens that reduces the brightness of headlights also reduces the lights reflected from dimly-lit objects at the side of the road, particularly pedestrians.
- Don't smoke while you're driving at night. In addition to the obvious distraction, nicotine and carbon monoxide, two of the ingredients in cigarette smoke, can reduce your vision when it's dark.
- Reduce speed and drive with extra care if you've just gotten your first glasses (in fact, some experts recommend new glasses wearers not drive at all for a while after receiving their glasses.) Newly-corrected nearsighted people tend to brake too quickly, while newly-corrected farsighted drivers tend to brake too slowly. In addition, a change in prescription may take some getting used to, and its effect on your driving should be taken into consideration.
- If you're wondering whether or not it's dark enough to turn on your lights, it is. They may not help you see any better in early twilight, but it will be much easier for other drivers to see you - the better other drivers can see, the less chance of an accident. Don't ask yourself: "How well can I see without my headlights?" Instead, ask: "How well can the other drivers see me without my lights on?"
- When you're following another vehicle at night keep your headlights on low beams so you won't blind the other driver.
- Switch your lights from high to low beam when an oncoming vehicle is about 500 feet away. Also, use the low beam within 300 feet (the length of a football field) of the rear of the vehicle you're following.
- Since you can't see as well at night, you won't have as much time to stop when you spot trouble as you would in daylight. Reduce speed accordingly.
- Try to beat out the oncoming driver in being first to switch from high to low beams.
- Increase your following distance at night.
- Never try to give oncoming drivers a taste their own medicine when they fail to switch to low beams. Switch your own lights from high to low, then avoid the approaching glare by watching the right edge of the road and using it as a steering guide.
- When you look ahead don't look only as far as your headlights light up the pavement brightly. That limits your visual range - a seeing trap into which many drivers fall. Peer ahead into the area that's only faintly illuminated. You may pick up the faint glow of a distant headlight or some movement that will alert you to a possible hazard.
- When you spot a deer or other animal on the road at night, switch headlights to lower beam and sound your horn.
- At night, primarily in rural areas, oncoming vehicles can be detected much quicker if you watch for their headlight reflections on electric or telephone lines alongside the road.
- Never stop on any roadway at night. It's hard for an approaching driver to tell whether or not your car is moving until it's too late.
- Take curves slower at night. Headlights pointing straight ahead shine off the road, reducing your view of the road considerably.
- Switch to low beams in fog or snow. High beams will reflect more off fog and snow, creating increased glare to throw off your vision.

According to a study by the Bureau of Motor Carrier Safety, the lowest level of alertness for most drivers is between 2 a.m. and 7 a.m. To stay alert, BMCS suggests drivers stop frequently, drink some coffee, walk around, lower windows while driving. These are only temporary stop gap measures. If you are tired and your body needs sleep the only thing that is truly effective is sleep.

When trouble - most notably a flat tire - forces a stop at night, take action for safety. Pull off the roadway as far as possible. Warn approaching traffic at once - use an illuminated or reflective device such as a flare or reflecting triangle - one at least 300 feet behind and another near the stopped vehicle. Turn on flasher lights, and the dome light. Stay away from the roadway. If you must work close to the road, try to keep approaching traffic in your field of vision. When it's necessary to stop on a narrow shoulder or other location that could be hazardous, get any passengers out of the car.