

## Chapter 6 - Safe Driving—A Real Workplace Concern

### Suggested Activities

- **Demonstrate** how to make a thorough safety check of a company vehicle
- **Show** employees where emergency equipment is stored in company vehicles.

For additional information, refer to the **Background** text below.

### Background

Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of deaths on the job, and a major cause of work-related injuries. Every company whose employees drive any kind of vehicle as part of their jobs should have a clearly written policy on vehicle use, maintenance, and formal driver training. Even employees whose jobs do not require driving will benefit from safety talks on sensible and defensive driving.

The driving behaviors that most often lead to accidents are: 1) driving too fast, 2) ignoring traffic signs and signals, 3) following too close to another vehicle, 4) driving in the wrong lane, and 5) failing to yield to another vehicle.

Every driver knows better than to do these things, but, at least some of the time, every driver does them. Here are a few basics of good driving that everyone should follow—on and off the job.

Obey the speed limits. Speed limits are posted because they're considered the safest top speed for the road. In addition, most states have raised their fines for speeding tickets and reduced the number of tickets allowed before suspending a driver's license. Workers who need to drive as part of the job can't risk losing their licenses.

Pay attention to traffic signals and signs. Even when you have the green light, look both ways to make sure someone else isn't jumping a red light from the other direction. Many drivers today seem to think a yellow light also means GO. It actually means STOP unless you're already in the intersection. Red lights mean STOP. Period. In some places, you're allowed to turn right on red, but you still have to come to a complete stop first and make sure there are no pedestrians or other cars in your way before you turn.

Traffic signs also provide important instructions. Stop means a full stop, not a pause. Yield means let the other vehicle go first. Signs that tell of construction or road hazards ahead are like the labels on containers of hazardous chemicals. They're a valuable source of information and a warning to take protective steps.

Don't follow too closely. Stay at least two seconds behind the vehicle in front of you. The easiest way to make sure of that is to notice when the driver ahead passes something

stationary, like a telephone pole. Start counting—"one thousand one," etc.—and be sure you complete at least "one thousand two" before you pass that same stationary object. If the weather is bad or if you're hauling a trailer, keep the distance even greater.

Pass on the left only, signaling first that you're going to do so. Check to see that 1) there is nothing coming from the other direction, 2) no one in back of you is trying to pass you at the same time, and 3) no one from a farther-left lane is moving to the same lane you want to enter. Then signal, pass, and signal as you're getting back into your lane.

Yield to drivers who have the right of way. In fact, yield to insistent drivers who don't. When merging onto another road, as from a highway entrance ramp, yield to drivers already on the highway. In a situation like a 4-way stop, courteously and cautiously take your turn going into the intersection.

## **Difficult Driving Conditions**

There are, not surprisingly, more accidents at night and in bad weather. Every driver should be prepared to modify driving habits during those times.

Night driving has two key hazards: poor visibility and exhaustion. People are tired at night and they may not be paying close attention to their driving or to you. In addition, reflexes may be slower, so you have to be extra alert to make up for possible lapses on your own part or that of other drivers.

Rain, snow, fog, and other weather conditions can be especially dangerous when you're driving. It's best to avoid driving in bad weather if possible, but you can't always do it. Here are some bad-weather driving tips.

Rain. A light rain can make the road just as slick as a heavy downpour, so keep your speed down as soon as it starts. And stay four, not two, seconds behind the driver in front. You can't count on stopping as quickly in the rain.

- Do your best to improve visibility. Use your windshield wipers, defroster, and headlights. Check this equipment periodically and replace defective items promptly.
- Be careful of large puddles. They can make your brakes less effective. Also, the splashes you create can make it impossible for other drivers to see. If you drive through a puddle, do it slowly, keeping your left foot lightly on the brake pedal to keep your brake pads dry. Test the brakes lightly afterwards.
- One of the worst problems in the rain is called hydroplaning. It means your tires are riding on the water instead of the road, and it tends to happen at speeds of 30 mph or more. The best way to avoid it is to drive more slowly and more smoothly in the rain, trying to avoid puddles. If you do find yourself hydroplaning—if your car gets out of control—take your foot off the gas. Don't brake suddenly.

Snow and ice. Snow and ice create numerous driving problems: glare, skids, getting stuck. Most people also feel more tense when driving in bad winter weather and don't drive as well as they might normally. These precautions will help:

- Reduce glare by wearing sunglasses.
- Remove snow from your windshield, windows, hood, and roof before you get in the car. Make sure your headlights and taillights are clear. As you drive, use your windshield wipers and your defroster.
- Reduce speed and increase the distance between you and the car in front. You need three to twelve times more distance to stop in snow or ice. Stop or slow down by braking slowly.
- If you skid, turn your steering wheel into the skid and take your foot off the gas pedal. Don't brake. Just steer gently into the direction of the skid and straighten out the wheel after each turn.
- Be on the lookout for icy patches. Bridges, as signs often warn, tend to freeze before normal road surfaces. Shaded spots will stay icier longer.

Fog. Fog is usually a warm-weather problem and can appear suddenly in patches. When entering a foggy area, slow down gradually to avoid hitting any unseen cars in front of you and to prevent any cars behind from hitting you. Use your headlights on low beam so that you can see and other people can see you. Use your windshield wipers and defroster. Avoid passing. If you can't see well enough to drive safely, do not stop in the roadway. Pull well off the road, leaving lights and flashers on so your car can be seen.

## **Seat Belts**

Seat belts, personal protective equipment for use when driving or riding in a car, can prevent many injuries and deaths. Two common myths about accidents and seat belts have been shattered by the National Safety Council. These myths are that 1) seat belts will trap drivers in their vehicles in case of fire or submersion, or 2) it is better to be thrown clear.

But the Council stresses that "Less than one-half of one percent of all injury-producing collisions involve fire or submersion"—and not wearing a seat belt could mean you're knocked unconscious, and unable to get out. Also, a person is "25 times more likely to be fatally injured if ejected from the vehicle than if inside and buckled up."

To be effective, a seat belt must be worn correctly. Keep the lap belt snug and low around the hips. The shoulder belt should go across the collarbone and over the shoulder, not under the arm. Above all, don't wear the shoulder belt alone, without the lap belt. In an accident you may break bones, be strangled, or be thrown around or out of the car.

Seat belts are necessary at all times. Most serious and fatal injuries occur in cars going less than 40 mph—and most could be avoided by wearing seat belts. Seat belt use is mandatory in an increasing number of states. But even if it's not required by law, it should be required by common sense and a desire to live.

## Defensive Driving Techniques

With today's overcrowded and under-maintained roads, every driver has to be constantly alert to potential accidents. There are a number of defensive driving techniques and strategies that can go a long way to promote on-the-road safety. Here are a few.

- Keep your eye on the other guy. In fact, always expect the worst from other drivers, who may not be as skillful, alert, or concerned as you. Expect them to go too fast, change lanes, pass, jam on the brakes, etc.
- Keep your eye on the road. You don't want to plow into a pothole or hit some piece of debris. Always be on the lookout for pedestrians, bicycles, and animals that can dart into the road, as well as for people getting out of parked cars.
- Don't let yourself get boxed in heavy traffic. Try to keep a little distance between you and the other car and keep an eye on where you can go if there's an accident. Slow down going into curves until you see what's ahead.
- Keep all your senses on high alert when you see a school bus. Never pass a stopped school bus—it's against the law. And keep in mind that school buses mean children getting on or off and crossing streets.
- Be aware that different vehicles handle differently and react differently to weather, wind, etc. If you're used to driving a heavy, full-size sedan, be cautious when you first drive a small car. It's lighter and needs more driver control in wind—even the wind created when you're passed by a large truck.
- Continually check other traffic with your rear- and side-view mirrors. Learn their blind spots, and turn your head occasionally to check whatever the mirrors don't show. Adjust mirrors as soon as you enter a different vehicle.
- Keep your mind on your driving, your eyes on the road, your hands on the wheel. Driving is no time to get deep into daydreams, planning, or conversation with a passenger.
- Don't drink and drive! Alcohol is believed to be a factor in at least half of motor vehicle deaths as well as many serious accidents. Drug use—even prescription drugs—can have similar effects. As in all work situations, substance abuse cannot be tolerated while driving company vehicles.
- Maintain your vehicle. Keep it tuned according to manufacturer's specifications. Make sure tires, lights, fluids, belts and wires, wipers, etc. are checked out regularly.

**Safe Driving Checklist**

## **Obey the Law**

- Observe speed limits.
- Obey traffic signs and signals.
- Pass other vehicles only on the left; signal your intention before changing lanes.
- Never pass a stopped school bus.
- Yield to drivers who have the right of way.
- Never drive under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.
- Use your seat belt (even if it's not required by law in your state).

## **Drive Sensibly and Defensively**

- Never "tailgate;" stay at least two seconds behind the driver ahead of you.
- Don't insist on your own right-of-way if the other driver will not yield it.
- Dim your headlights for oncoming cars and those ahead.
- Be aware of what's happening several vehicle lengths ahead and behind you.
- Expect the unexpected:
  - Reckless behavior from other drivers
  - People, or animals darting into the road
  - Swerving cyclists
  - Potholes or debris in the roadway

## **Take Bad Weather Precautions**

- Improve visibility:
  - Use wipers, defroster, and headlights
  - Counter glare from sun or snow with sunglasses
  - Clear snow from hood, roof, and all windows
- When visibility is poor or roadways are slick:
  - Reduce speed
  - Increase distance from car ahead
  - Brake gently
- Watch out for puddles, icy patches, sudden pockets of fog.
- If you skid, steer gently "into it," not using brakes or gas.

## **Maintain Your Vehicle**

- Don't abuse it by driving too fast over bumpy terrain.
- Don't make unnecessarily sharp turns or sudden stops and starts.
- Be sure that scheduled maintenance checks are carried out on time.
- Be alert to below-par performance of any equipment; have it attended to promptly.

