

3. HAZARDOUS CONDITIONS

Like all drivers, transit drivers must use extra caution and apply special skills when driving in hazardous situations. This section presents some of the dangerous conditions you may face and the precautions you can take to protect your passengers and yourself.

Darkness

The main danger when driving in darkness (whether at nighttime, early morning, or due to fog or other weather conditions) is **reduced visibility**. The decreased ability to see is made even worse by several factors:

- *The transit driver and other drivers may have reduced ability and concentration because of fatigue.*
- *Some drivers forget to turn on their headlights.*
- *At night, there may be an increased number of intoxicated drivers on the road.*

All drivers face these risks when driving in the dark. The risks are greater for some drivers whose **visual recovery time** is higher than others. Visual recovery time is the time it takes a driver's night vision to return to normal after being blinded by bright lights. (Sometimes this is critical in daytime as well. Drivers can be blinded by intense sun reflected off chrome or glass.)

Listed below are some specific causes that make visual recovery time higher for some individuals than for others:

- *Age -- recovery time increases as people get older*
- *High blood pressure*
- *Diabetes*
- *Other medical conditions*

These drivers will need to take special care when driving in the dark.

The usual **precautions** to take in the dark include the following:

- *Reducing speed; drive within the range of your headlights*
- *Staying at a greater distance from the car in front of you*
- *Watching for signs of poor driving on the part of other drivers*
- *Using bright beams as appropriate*
- *Looking away from high-beam headlights on oncoming cars (follow road markings to the right of the vehicle)*

As a professional driver your eyes are an important tool. You need to take proper care of them and have regular examinations.

Rain, Snow, Sleet, Fog and Ice

The main danger associated with rain, snow, sleet, fog, and ice is **reduced traction**. **Specific types of problems can include:**

- *Compacted snow and black ice*
- *Reduced visibility from snow or fog or from windshields that are frosted, covered with ice or snow*
- *Increased stopping distance*
- *Inability of other drivers to handle conditions*
- *Traffic obstructions, including stalled vehicles, accidents, and reduced road clearance from plowed roads*
- *Wet leaves and loose gravel on the road*

How can a driver deal with these hazards?

- **Reduce speed -- this is the primary defense.**
- **Increase following distance.**
- **Never drive a vehicle without thoroughly cleaning all windows and making sure the defroster and windshield wipers are working.**
- **Avoid sudden stops or turns or rapid changes in speed; start and stop smoothly and gradually.**
- **Be particularly careful when crossing any elevated structures (a bridge or overpass) because they freeze more quickly than the roadway.**
- **Watch for drivers who are not driving safely in these conditions.**

But what if you find yourself in the middle of a skid on ice or snow?

In every case, the professional driver realizes that special skills are required to control the vehicle, and acquiring those skills takes both mental and physical practice.

The first step when you feel a skid is to take your feet off the brakes and the accelerator.

The second step is to turn your steering wheel into the skid. You may feel this is just the opposite of what you should do, but whether you're skidding on ice, sliding on hard-packed snow or water, the two steps are identical. Foot off brakes and accelerator. Steer into the skid.

In some cases, you may have to turn the steering wheel back and forth two or three times before you can slow the vehicle down enough to gain control. Again, do not use your brakes because you can't control your vehicle's direction unless your tires are rotating.

What if you are approaching water that's deep enough to reach your engine compartment, drown out your engine, and cause you to stall? When going through deep water, where you can see its other side, shift into the lowest gear and keep your engine running high to prevent drowning out and stalling. If you cannot see its end, or you feel it is too dangerous to continue, secure the vehicle and inform the dispatch of the situation.

If you see that the water is too deep to get through, and your judgment says you need to back out, keep the engine running by holding the accelerator pedal down as you brake. Be aware, however, that this maneuver makes it harder to stop your vehicle. Once stopped, shift into reverse quickly, checking to make sure it is clear behind you. Keep the engine running high as you back out by a combination of acceleration and braking.

Whether you back out or drive through, drive slowly afterward and continue touching your brakes for a few minutes to heat them up and dry them out. Test frequently to see if the brakes are dry enough to stop you quickly. Always check traffic behind to make sure it is safe to do so.

Other conditions that can be particularly dangerous are:

- *The first few moments of rain. Traction is reduced in that critical time during which road oils are released to the road surface but are not yet washed away.*
- *Blizzards or fog that cause "white out," and extremely limited visibility.*
- *Covered or hidden lane markings. You can lose your sense of position on the road.*

The primary defense in these situations is to reduce speed and increase following distance. In severe cases, the driver must decide **whether the only safe action is to pull over and wait until conditions**

improve, or to call for help. When pulling off the road, hazard lights should be on and flares/triangles deployed as appropriate.

Extreme Weather

In addition to the weather and road conditions described above, the driver may face rare but very dangerous geographic hazards - those that are caused by natural events such as:

- *flooding*
- *earthquake*
- *tornado*
- *avalanche*
- *hurricane*
- *dust storms*

It is the responsibility of drivers to check with their system management to familiarize themselves with the policies and procedures covering weather hazards for their particular geographical region.

POINTS FOR REVIEW

- *The main danger in driving when it is dark is reduced visibility. Visual recovery time differs among drivers because it is affected by age, medical conditions, and other factors.*
- *As a professional, your eyes are a critical tool and you need to take care of them.*
- *Driving in the dark should be handled with care because of the increased number of tired and intoxicated drivers on the road.*
- *Rain, snow, and other weather conditions reduce visibility and traction.*
- *Reducing speed and following distance is always the first defense against hazardous conditions.*

- *Evaluating their personal limitations - the way you feel physically can influence your ability to react. Lack of sleep, illness, personal problems, and especially drug and alcohol abuse (even being hungover) will reduce your ability to avoid emergency situations, or worse, be the reason you become involved in an emergency.*

In summary, drivers about to leave on the first trip of the day owe it to themselves and their passengers to prepare in two ways:

- *By making sure their vehicle is in safe, reliable, operating condition.*
- *By mentally rehearsing their reactions to any hazardous situations or emergencies that they might encounter -- and that requires knowing their vehicle, their passengers, where they're going, and about any potentially hazardous weather or traffic patterns.*

In addition to daily checks, professional drivers need to regularly review how to handle emergencies by restudying the materials in this and other training programs, learning from their own experiences, and talking to other drivers about how they have dealt with various situations.

POINTS FOR REVIEW

- Many types of emergencies can occur during a driver's day; they usually cannot be predicted, but steps can be taken to prepare for them.
- No system policy or training program can cover all the emergencies a driver potentially faces.
- One important way to help prevent emergencies is to perform a daily pre-trip inspection of your vehicle.
- A way to prepare for possible hazards is to be informed about weather, road, and traffic conditions.

- Evaluate yourself. If you aren't physically or mentally up-to-par, make an adjustment. If you are unable to drive safely, don't drive!
- The single most important tool drivers can use to prevent and respond to emergencies is their professional judgment and experience.
- **Remember, you should always wear a seat belt when operating your vehicle.** This will help you maintain control of your vehicle in an emergency, and may prevent you from being injured. If you should be in an accident, wearing a seat belt increases the chances that you'll be able to respond to the needs of your passengers. **SEAT BELTS SAVE LIVES.**

